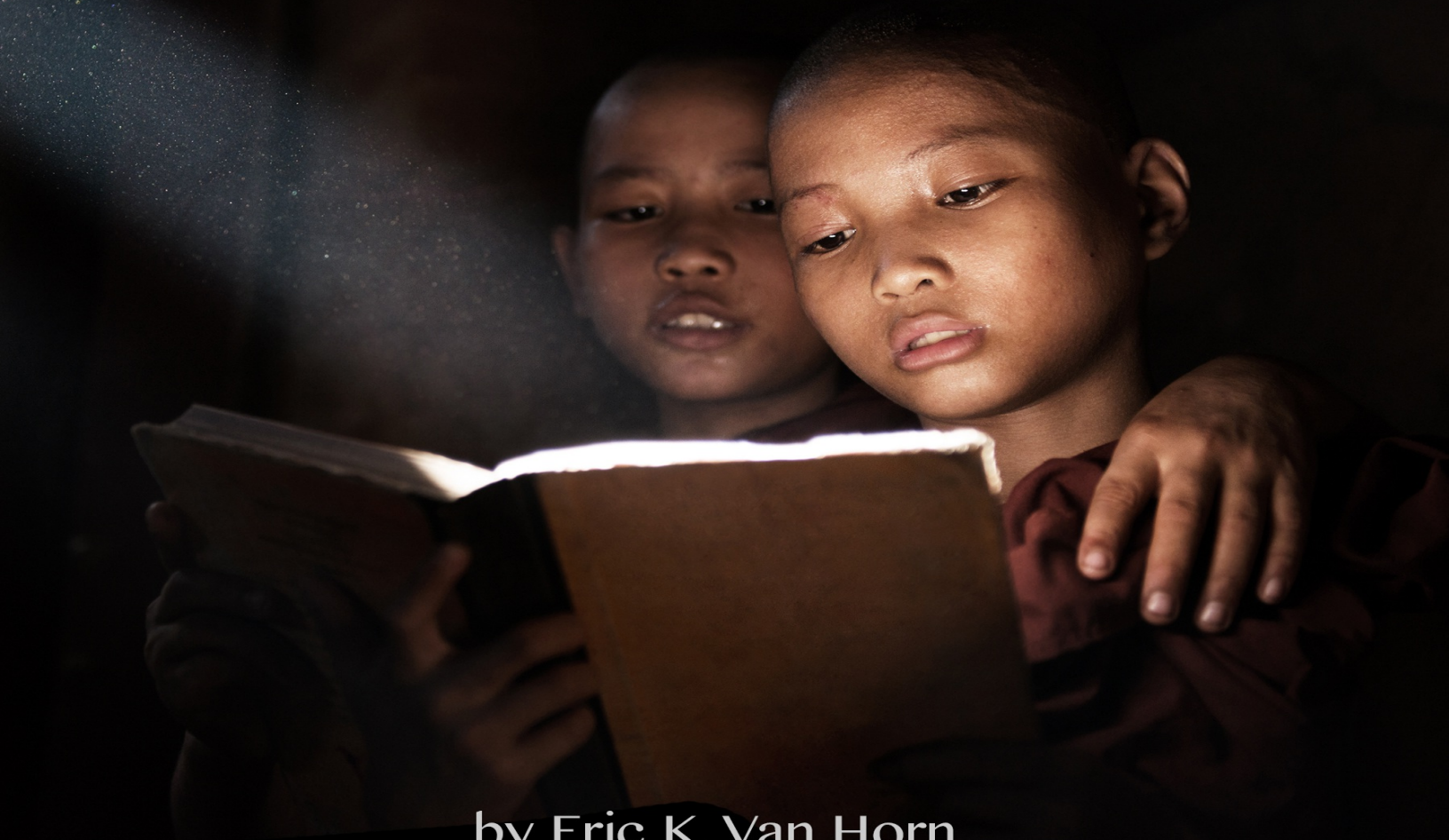
Book 7 in the *Little Books on Buddhism* Series

The Little Book of Buddhist Awakening

The Buddha's instructions on attaining enlightenment



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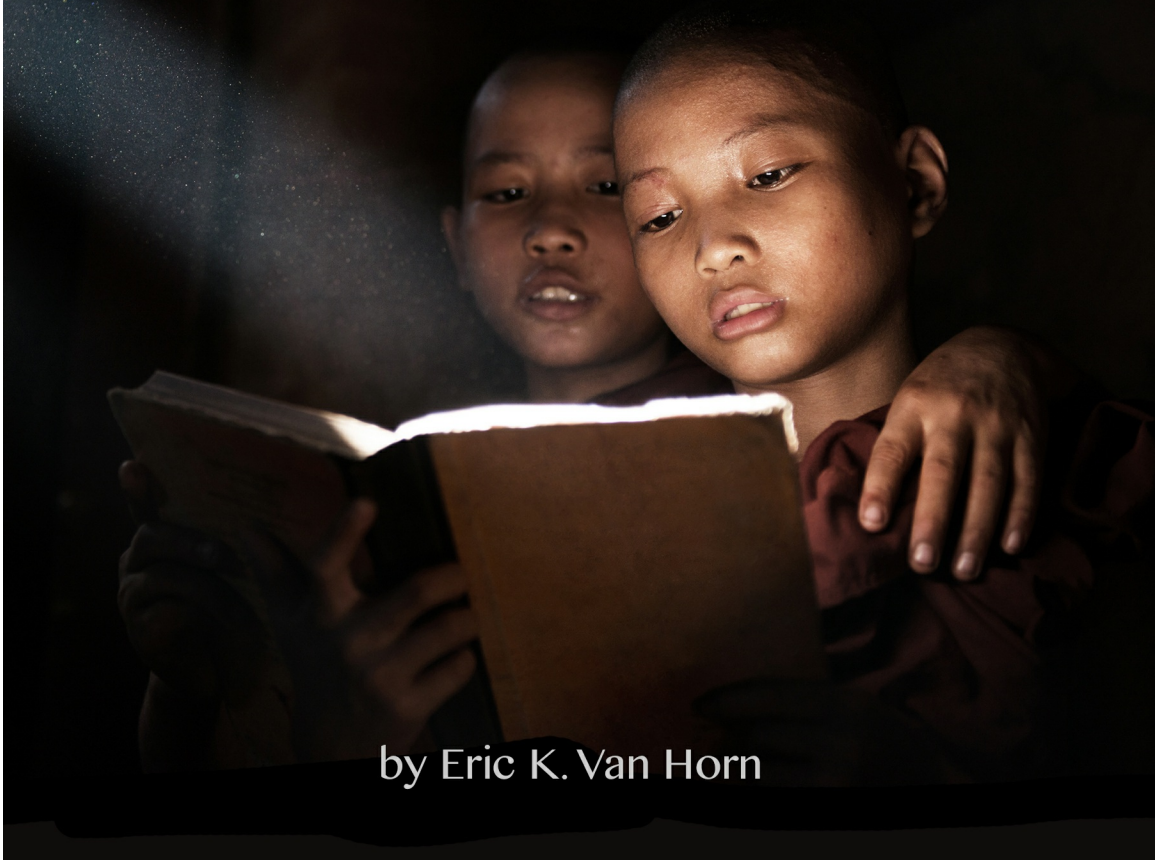

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The Little Book

of

Buddhist Awakening

The Buddha’s instructions on attaining enlightenment

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Dedicated to my Dharma brothers and sisters.

Other than awakening itself,

There is nothing more precious than

Good friendship in the holy life.

“This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is,

good friendship, good companionship,

good comradeship.” - [SN 45.2]

"'The safe and good path to be traveled joyfully' is a term for the Noble Eight Book Path."

The Little Books on Buddhism series:

Book 1: *The Little Book of Buddhist Meditation: Establishing a daily meditation practice*

Book 2: *The Little Book on Buddhist Virtue: The Buddha's teachings on happiness through skillful conduct*

Book 3: *The Little Book of the Life of the Buddha*

Book 4: *The Little Book of Buddhist Wisdom: The Buddha's teachings on the Four Noble Truths, the three marks of existence, causality, and karma*

Book 5: *The Little Book of Buddhist Mindfulness & Concentration*

Book 6: *The Little Book of Buddhist Daily Living: The Discipline for Lay People*

Book 7: *The Little Book of Buddhist Rebirth*

Book 8: *The Little Book of Buddhist Awakening: The Buddha's instructions on attaining enlightenment*

Also by this author:

The Travel Guide to the Buddha's Path

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Preface

> *“Bhikkhus, what do you think, which is more: the little bit of soil that I have taken up in my fingernail or this great earth?”*
>
> *“Venerable sir, the great earth is more. The little bit of soil that the Blessed One has taken up in his fingernail is trifling. It does not amount to a hundredth part, or a thousandth part, or a hundred thousandth part of the great earth.”*
>
> *“So too, bhikkhus, for a noble disciple, a person accomplished in view who has made the breakthrough, the suffering that has been destroyed and eliminated is more, while that which remains is trifling. The latter does not amount to a hundredth part, or a thousandth part, or a hundred thousandth part of the former mass of suffering that has been destroyed and eliminated, as there is a maximum of seven more lives. Of such great benefit, bhikkhus, is the breakthrough to the Dhamma [Dharma], of such great benefit is it to obtain the vision of the Dhamma.”* - [SN 13.1]

This book tackles the $64,000 Buddhist question, “How do I become free from suffering?” How do I attain enlightenment and awaken?

All of the other Little Books lay the foundation for this one. It is not that you cannot have a practice that does not aspire to awakening and get value from it. Of course you can. That is how most meditators practice.

But the ultimate prize in the Buddha’s training is to awaken, to become free from the rounds of rebirth. This Little Book shows how that is

possible. It may seem like a far-off dream. But it is the journey of 1,000 miles, and you take it one mindful breath at a time.

Eric Van Horn
Rio Rancho, New Mexico
12-Sep-2016
nobleeightfoldblog.com

Terminology and Conventions

Because the Buddhist Canon that I use is in the Pāli language, I usually use Pāli terms. However, some Sanskrit Buddhist terms have become common in the English language and it seems rather affected not to use them. The two most obvious examples are the words "nirvāṇa," which is "nibbāna" in Pāli, and "Dharma," which is "Dhamma" in Pāli. For the most part, I use the commonly known terms. But if it seems awkward to have the Pāli terms in quotes or in certain words (like *Dhammacakkappavattana*) and use the Sanskrit terms in the main text, I use the Pāli words.

I try to avoid technical terms in the beginning of the guide until you can get used to them. However, if there are terms with which you are unfamiliar, they should be in the glossary in Appendix A.

As per APA style guidelines, book names are italicized (i.e., *Foundations of Buddhism*) and magazine articles and Internet resources are capitalized and quoted (i.e., "The Benefits of Walking Meditation").

Internet Conventions

There are many references to resources that are on the Internet. This is always a problem because hyperlinks are notoriously unreliable. Thus, I have adopted a convention of putting Internet search keywords in the text as well as a hyperlink to the resource. For example, a reference to Thich Nhat Hahn's gāthās ("poems") is "thich nhat hanh gathas here and now." If links are supported and the link is not broken, clicking on the search keywords will open that resource. If you are reading this in a context where Internet links are not supported or the link is broken, you can still find the resource by doing a search using the keywords. If you use the search keywords, the resource should be the first one in the search result list.

The other case is when an article is cited. It will look like this:

- [Sayadaw U Silananda, "The Benefits of Walking Meditation"]

Again, if your reader does not support hyperlinks or the link is broken, searching on the author's name and the article name should get you to the article. Some names and words use diacritical marks and you may have to remove them to find the correct resource. For example, for the name "Ṭhānissaro" use the non-diacritical form "Thanissaro."

Abbreviations Used for Pāli Text References

AN: *Aṇguttara Nikāya, The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*

Bv: *Buddhavaṃsa, Chronicle of Buddhas*

BvA: *Buddhavaṃsatthakathā*, commentary to the *Buddhavaṃsa*

Cv: *Cullavagga, the "smaller book,"* the second volume in the *Khandhaka*, which is the second book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)

Dhp: *Dhammapada, The Path of Dhamma*, a collection of 423 verses

DhpA: *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, commentary to the *Dhammapada*

DN: *Digha Nikāya, The Long Discourses of the Buddha*

Iti: *Itivuttaka, This Was Said* (by the Buddha), a.k.a., Sayings of the Buddha

Ja: *Jātaka Tales*, previous life stories of the Buddha

JaA: *Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā*, commentary on the *Jātaka Tales*

Khp: *Khuddakapāṭha, Short Passages*

MA: *Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā*, commentary on the *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (by Buddhaghosa)

MN: *Majjhima Nikāya, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*

Mv: *Mahāvagga*, the first volume in the *Khandhaka*, which is the second book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)

Pm: *Pātimokkha, The Code of Monastic Discipline*, the first book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)

SN: *Saṃyutta Nikāya, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*

S Nip: *Sutta Nipāta, The Sutta Collection*, literally, "suttas falling down," a sutta collection in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* consisting mostly of verse

Sv: *Sutta-vibhaṇga: Classification of the Suttas*, the "origin stories" for the Pātimokkha rules

Thag: *Theragāthā: Verses of the Elder Monks*

ThagA: *Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, Commentary to the *Theragāthā*

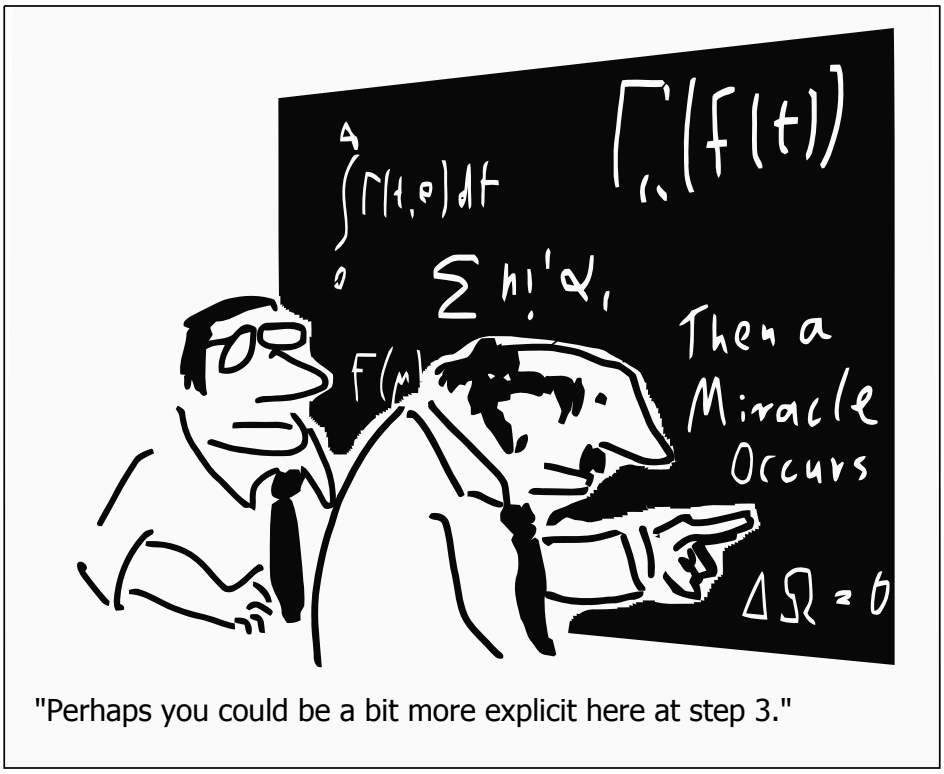
Thig: *Therīgāthā: Verses of the Elder Nuns*

ThigA: *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, Commentary to the *Therīgāthā*

Ud: *Udana, Exclamations*, the third book of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*

Vin: *Vinaya Pitaka, Basket of Discipline*, the monastic rules for monks and nuns.

1. Introduction



"Perhaps you could be a bit more explicit here at step 3."

For the first 20 years of my practice, I thought awakening was like this cartoon. Practice Method One was to sit and sit and sit, and after a while a miracle would occur. Practice Method Two was to watch "whatever arises" - to just "be with it" - and a miracle would occur. No one could connect the dots for me. How do you go from a breath awareness practice to opening to the deathless dimension? "Opening to the deathless" sounds ominous, and I felt like I was trying to build a house without any construction skills or a blueprint.

Fortunately the Buddha gave us good instructions on how to awaken. Admittedly the instruction manual is pretty long, but everything you need is there.

This Little Book begins with a discussion of what nirvāṇa is. What does it mean to awaken, to become enlightened? The Buddha described

awakening in a number of different ways. These ways are examined as they are preserved in the Pāli Canon.

The section on nirvāṇa is followed by some comments on misconceptions about awakening. For example, you will hear that awakening is no big deal. It is somewhat trivialized. You will also see people who claim to have awakened but who behave in morally dubious ways.

Next there is a review of what your practice should be. If you have arrived at this book, you should have a firmly grounded daily practice. Preferably you can attain jhāna. But even if those things are not true, perhaps this book can inspire you to establish the Dharma as the central focus of your life and show you the possibilities.

Then there is a discussion of some of the subtleties of awakening. This includes how our different temperaments and personalities affect the process of awakening. It is also important to practice in a balanced way. It is a little like how athletes cross train, eat properly, and get sufficient rest. In that way a whole body that is fit is more conducive to success in a particular sport.

What follows is a definition of stream-entry, the first stage of awakening. What is it? What must you do to become a stream-enterer? What can keep you from "entering the stream?"

Then there are the qualities to be cultivated: dispassion, a still mind, and the inner observer.

And finally there is a description of what the process of awakening looks like, or perhaps more precisely, what it can look like. This is seeing into the ever-changing, ever-flowing process that you are, seeing past any pretension about being fixed or solid, having a permanent essence. Self-view dies and is put to rest. You are free from suffering, stress, "sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair" [MN 11.7].

What remains is *just this*.

2. What is Nirvāṇa?

"The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences."

- [Xinxin Ming, The Third Patriarch of Zen]

"Imagine what it would be like to live a life without fear?"

- [Sharon Salzberg]

The word "nirvāṇa" literally means "to extinguish." The Three Poisons (greed, hatred, and delusion) in early Buddhism were also called "The Three Fires." [Richard F. Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*] Thus one definition of nirvāṇa is "extinguishing the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion." Once the mind extinguishes the fires, it does not create any new karma. It is incapable of greed, hatred, and delusion, and is only motivated by generosity, love, compassion, and wisdom.

The Buddha focused on the process whereby the mind attains this experience. Thus the word "nirvāṇa" is more a verb than a noun. It is not a state of mind in which one exists. It is an experience, after which the mind is free from suffering and the rounds of rebirth. To use the often-quoted phrase, the mind is "nirvāṇa-ed," or "nirvāṇized":

Back in the days of the Buddha, nirvana (nibbana) had a verb of its own: nibbuti. It meant to "go out," like a flame. Because fire was thought to be in a state of entrapment as it burned — both clinging to and trapped by the fuel on which it fed — its going out was seen as an unbinding. To go out was to be unbound. Sometimes another verb was

used — parinibbuti — with the "pari-" meaning total or all-around, to indicate that the person unbound, unlike fire unbound, would never again be trapped.

Now that nirvana has become an English word, it should have its own English verb to convey the sense of "being unbound" as well. At present, we say that a person "reaches" nirvana or "enters" nirvana, implying that nibbana is a place where you can go. But nirvana is most emphatically not a place. It's realized only when the mind stops defining itself in terms of place: of here, or there, or between the two.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "A Verb for Nirvana"]

There is still old karma to work out, but no new karma is created, and when the body dies, it is no longer subject to the rounds of rebirth. Nirvāṇa is "unconditioned," distinguishing it from the rest of existence where everything is conditioned:

"There is, bhikkhus, that base where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air; no base consisting of the infinity of space, no base consisting of the infinity of consciousness, no base consisting of nothingness, no base consisting of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; neither this world nor another world nor both; neither sun nor moon. Here, bhikkhus, I say there is no coming, no going, no staying, no deceasing, no uprising. Not fixed, not movable, it has no support. Just this is the end of suffering." – [Ud 80]

Now we are dealing with the transcendent. It is beyond any conventional experience of time and space. Our normal frames of reference do not apply. In the "Aggivacchagotta Sutta: To Vacchagotta on Fire" [MN 72] the Buddha used the simile of fire to make this point:

“If someone were to ask you, Vaccha: ‘When that fire before you was extinguished, to which direction did it go: to the east, the west, the north, or the south?’ - being asked thus, what would you answer?”

“That does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burned in dependence on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, being without fuel, it is reckoned as extinguished.”

“So too, Vaccha, the Tathāgata has abandoned that material form by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him; he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The Tathāgata is liberated from reckoning in terms of material form, Vaccha, he is profound, immeasurable, hard to fathom like the ocean. ‘He reappears’ does not apply; ‘he does not reappear’ does not apply; ‘he both reappears and does not reappear’ does not apply; ‘he neither reappears nor does not reappear’ does not apply. The Tathāgata has abandoned that feeling by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him…has abandoned that perception by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him… has abandoned those formations by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him… has abandoned that consciousness by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him; he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The Tathāgata is liberated from reckoning in terms of consciousness, Vaccha; he is profound, immeasurable, hard to fathom like the ocean.” - [MN 72.20]

The Buddha famously refused to answer certain philosophical questions. The nature of an arahant (or "Tathāgata," as in the quote) after death is one such issue. These questions are called "The Unanswered Questions," or "The Unfathomable Questions" (Sanskrit avyākṛta, Pāli: avyākata - "unfathomable, unexpounded"). The Buddha went even further to say that holding a view or an opinion on these questions can actually keep us from awakening. In the "Nivāpa Sutta: The Bait" [MN 25] he compared anyone who holds such views to a deer that is trapped by hunters, where the views are the bait:

> *"But then they came to hold views such as 'the world is eternal' and 'the world is not eternal' and 'the world is finite' and 'the world is infinite' and 'the soul and the body are the same' and 'the soul is one thing and the body another' and 'after death a Tathāgata exists' and 'after death a Tathāgata does not exist' and 'after death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist' and 'after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist.' That is how those recluses and brahmins of the third kind failed to get free from Māra's power and control."* - [MN 25.12]

The Buddha told us to remain focused on solving the problem of suffering and warned against trying to characterize the un-characterizable. It's a waste of time (and space), and a hindrance to our goal. Nonetheless, even during his lifetime monks tried to anyway, and he reprimanded them for doing so [SN 22.85, SN 22.86]. So of course speculation on the unconditioned has continued to the present day.

The more important questions are a) do I want it and b) how do I get there?

As to the first question, the Buddha assured us in the strongest possible terms that the answer is "yes":

"Bhikkhus, suppose there were a man with a life span of a hundred years, who could live a hundred years. Someone would say to him: 'Come, good man, in the morning they will strike you with a hundred spears; at noon they will strike you with a hundred spears; in the evening they will strike you with a hundred spears. And you, good man, being struck day after day by three hundred spears will have a life span of a hundred years, will live a hundred years; and then, after a hundred years have passed, you will make the breakthrough to the Four Noble Truths, to which you had not broken through earlier.'

"It is fitting, bhikkhus, for a clansman intent on his good to accept the offer." – [SN 56.35]

As to the latter question, the answer is the Noble Eightfold Path.

In *The Little Book on Buddhist Rebirth* we discussed another way to understand nirvāṇa, and that is by eliminating the fetters. The Buddha enumerated these fetters, and defined four stages of awakening. These stages are characterized in two ways. One is the fetters that are eliminated, and the other is how eliminating these fetters affects rebirth. In the sutta "The Brick Hall" Ānanda asked the Buddha about the rebirths of a number of disciples. The Buddha responded as follows:

"The more than fifty male lay followers who have died in Ñātika had, with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, become of spontaneous birth, due to attain nibbāna there without returning from that world. The male lay followers exceeding ninety who have died in Ñātika had, with the utter destruction of three fetters and with the diminishing of greed, hatred, and delusion, become once-returners who, after coming back to this

world only one more time, will make an end to suffering. The five hundred and six male lay followers who have died in Ñātika had, with the utter destruction of three fetters, become stream-enterers, no more bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as their destination." - [SN 55.10]

Here we see that by eliminating the lower five fetters one becomes of "spontaneous rebirth, due to attain nibbāna there without returning from that world." This is a non-returner, one who will have no more human rebirths.

Once-returners "with the utter destruction of three fetters and with the diminishing of greed, hatred, and delusion" will have no more than one human rebirth. And with "the utter destruction of three fetters" one becomes a stream-enterer, one who will attain a full awakening in no more than seven lifetimes.

And finally, an arahant has destroyed the lower five fetters as well as the higher five fetters. The fetters are:

The lower fetters:

1. Personality view (i.e. a doctrine of self).
2. Attachment to rites and rituals.
3. Doubt in the Buddha's teaching.
4. Sensual desire.
5. Ill will.

The higher fetters:

6. Desire for a material rebirth (i.e., rebirth in one of the material realms).
7. Desire for an immaterial rebirth (rebirth in one of the immaterial realms).
8. Conceit.

9. Restlessness.
10. Ignorance.

Another way to understand nirvāṇa is "cessation," as in the Third Noble Truth:

> *"And what, friends, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go, and rejecting of that same craving. This is called the noble truth of the cessation of suffering."* - [MN 141.22]

"Cessation" here means "the cessation of craving." The chain of dependent co-arising is broken. One who is fully awakened does not feed the chain of causation. This is because ignorance, which is at the root of the chain of dependent co-arising, is cut off. The ignorance is replaced by direct, clear, knowledge:

> *"He fully understands by direct knowledge those things that should be fully understood by direct knowledge. He abandons by direct knowledge those things that should be abandoned by direct knowledge. He develops by direct knowledge those things that should be developed by direct knowledge. He realizes by direct knowledge those things that should be realized by direct knowledge."* – [MN 149.10]

While the word "knowledge" is used here, a more appropriate term is "knowing." "Knowledge" is something you spit back on a test. It is a piece of information. "Knowing" is something that you experience directly. "Knowledge" is when the Battle of Hastings was fought. "Knowing" is how you felt when you got your driver's license.

The Buddha also defined the end of the path as the destruction of the "taints":

> *"I have proclaimed to my disciples the way whereby by realizing for themselves with direct knowledge, they here and now enter upon and abide in the deliverance of mind and deliverance by wisdom that are taintless with the destruction of the taints. And thereby many disciples of mine abide having reached the consummation and perfection of direct knowledge."* – [MN 77.36]

The taints are 1) sense desire, 2) becoming and 3) ignorance.

Thus there are a number of ways by which the end of the path is understood:

1. The extinguishing of greed, hatred, and delusion.
2. The destruction of the fetters.
3. The cessation of craving.
4. The destruction of the taints.

The realm is variously called "the deathless," "the unconditioned," the "unborn, unaging, unailing," etc. The attainment is called "enlightenment," "liberation," "release" and "awakening." The term "enlightenment" fell out of favor in the West because it is confused with the Age of Enlightenment. But you hear all of these terms, and they all have some justification for their use. I generally use the term "awakening" to describe the experience. This is consistent with the word "Buddha" which literally means "one who is awake." You awaken to transcendent understanding, direct, clear knowing. And I tend to use "the unconditioned" to define the realm. But the preferred terms are somewhat a case of tomayto, tomahto.

3. Misconceptions About Awakening

It is worth addressing some common misconceptions about awakening.

Attaining the first stage of awakening - stream-entry - causes a fundamental change in the mind. This is why a stream-enterer attains a full awakening in no more than seven lifetimes. Even the uncertainties of rebirth do not cause the mind to lose its positive, karmic momentum. The change is permanent.

There is a popular book that suggests that stream-entry is no big deal, that after you attain an awakening, you just go back to the mundane activities of life. This is not correct. You are never the same after attaining stream-entry, and that is a very good thing:

> *These three obstructions fall away when a path and fruit moment has been experienced. There's a marked change in such a person, which is - of course - not externally visible. It would be nice to wear a halo and look blissful. But the inner change is firstly that the experience leaves absolutely no doubt what has to be done in this life. The event is totally different from anything previously known, so much so, that it makes one's former life, up to that point, immaterial. Nothing can be found in the past which has fundamental importance. The only significance lies in going ahead with the practice so that this minimal experience of the first path moment can be fortified, resurrected and firmly established in oneself.*
>
> - [Ayya Khema, "Path and Fruit"]

You also see the quote that a "moment of mindfulness is a moment of awakening." This "is something the Buddha would never say, because mindfulness is conditioned and nirvāṇa is not." [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Mindfulness Defined"] Stream-entry is somewhat trivialized in the West. Attaining stream-entry is not easy, and when it happens to you, it is a pivotal moment in your existence.

But even if you do not attain stream-entry in this lifetime, it is important to set it as a goal. Even the aspiration for stream-entry makes you a member of the noble Saṇgha:

> *The noble Saṇgha consists of eight types of noble persons, who are joined into four pairs in relation to the four stages of awakening. The two members of each pair are the one who has attained the stage itself and the one who has entered the path leading irreversibly toward that stage. They are stated concisely thus: "The stream-enterer, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of stream-entry; the once-returner, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of once-returning; the non-returner, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of non-returning; the arahant, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of arahantship.*
>
> - [Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Aṇguttara Nikāya*, Introduction]

The work of attaining stream-entry happens moment-by-moment and breath-by-breath. It's not a trophy that you put on your Dharma mantelpiece. As with so many parts of Dharma practice, you make the aspiration, and then when you sit, you sit. Otherwise the aspiration becomes an obstruction. Making the aspiration plants a seed in the subconscious, but then you attend to the heedfulness that helps the seed to manifest:

> *To look for path and fruit will not bring them about,*

because only moment to moment awareness can do so. This awareness will eventually culminate in real concentration where one can let go of thinking and be totally absorbed. We can drop the meditation subject at that time. We need not push it aside, it falls away of its own accord, and absorption in awareness occurs. If there has to be an ambition in one's life, this is the only worthwhile one. All others will not bring fulfillment.

- [Ayya Khema, "Path and Fruit"]

There are many people who claim to have attained stream-entry, but when I read their accounts I am skeptical. In fact, it is not just stream-entry but a full awakening to which some lay claim. But some of these people behave in very unethical ways. Some of them have taken sexual advantage of their students. Some have urged their students to behave in unethical ways. It is not possible to do these things and to have awakened. The Buddha always stressed that virtuous conduct is one of the marks of a stream-enterer:

"Again, some person fulfills virtuous behavior but cultivates concentration, and wisdom only to a moderate extent. With the utter destruction of three fetters, this person is a seven-times-at-most attainer who, after roaming and wandering on among devas and humans seven times at most, makes an end of suffering. This is the ninth person, passing away with a residue remaining, who is freed from hell, the animal realm, and the sphere of afflicted spirits; freed from the plane of misery, the bad destination, the lower world." - [AN 9.12.6]

The phrase "fulfills virtuous behavior" is sometimes translated as "accomplished in the precepts." So if you know anyone who claims to be a stream-enter, and they lie, steal, manipulate, commit acts of sexual misconduct, or any other breach of ethical conduct, you know that they

are not.

4. The Core Practice

There are three parts to a fully defined Buddhist practice:

1. Studying the Buddha's teachings.
2. Practicing virtue.
3. Meditation.

I am going to leave a discussion of studying the Buddha's teachings to the section on "Preconditions to Stream-Entry" and the topic "Hearing the True Dharma."

Virtue

For those of you who have read the other Little Books you are probably getting tired of me repeating the necessity of practicing virtue. But I have seen so much unskillful behavior over the years by people who claim to be practicing the Buddhist path. Many of them meditate like crazy, and then go about having irresponsible sex, speaking harshly, and generally behaving badly. I have personally been mistreated not just by students but frequently by teachers as well.

So I will say it once again. If you do not practice virtue, there is almost no point to the rest of the path. The mind will not settle, and you will just be annoying. That is not to say that we will all be perfect. Of course we will not be. But we must make skillful behavior a top priority. We must learn how to look honestly at our actions. We must also be compassionate towards ourselves.

I usually say that the practice of generosity is the ground of the whole path and that is true. But there is even a prerequisite for generosity and that is gratitude:

"And what is the plane of the bad person? A bad person is

ungrateful and unthankful. For ingratitude and unthankfulness are extolled by the bad. Ingratitude and unthankfulness belong entirely to the plane of the bad person.

"And what is the plane of the good person? A good person is grateful and thankful. For gratitude and thankfulness are extolled by the good. Gratitude and thankfulness belong entirely to the plane of the good person." - [AN 2.32]

"Gratitude is considered the beginning of all skillful qualities. Generosity is considered the basis for all of the practice."

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Gratitude, Generosity and Goodwill", March 27, 2004]

Generosity is not writing a check. It is a quality of mind. It is about feeling sufficiency, that you have enough so that you can share with others. The greatest forms of generosity are when you give of your kindness and love and compassion. If money is involved then that is fine, but the act should first and foremost be an act of the heart.

There is also the aspect to virtue of being a person of integrity. This begins with being honest. The Buddha valued honesty so much that when he taught his seven year-old son Rāhula the Dharma, it is the first quality that he discussed:

Now on that occasion the venerable Rāhula was living at Ambalaṭṭhikā. Then, when it was evening, the Blessed One rose from meditation and went to the venerable Rāhula at Ambalaṭṭhikā. The venerable Rāhula saw the Blessed One coming in the distance and made a seat

ready and set out water for washing the feet. The Blessed One sat down on the seat made ready and washed his feet. The venerable Rāhula paid homage to him and sat down at one side.

Then the Blessed One left a little water in the water vessel and asked the venerable Rāhula: "Rāhula, do you see this little water left in the water vessel?"

"Yes, venerable sir."

"Even so little, Rāhula, is the recluseship of those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie."

Then the Blessed One threw away the little water that was left and asked the venerable Rāhula: "Rāhula, do you see that little water that was thrown away?"

"Yes, venerable sir."

"Even so, Rāhula, those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie have thrown away their recluseship."

Then the Blessed One turned the water vessel upside down and asked the venerable Rāhula: "Rāhula, do you see this water vessel turned upside down?"

"Yes, venerable sir."

"Even so, Rāhula, those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie have turned their recluseship upside down." - [MN 61.2-5]

Sarah Shaw points out in her book *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta* "a Bodhisatta might lapse in other ways but cannot say what is

not true."

Meditation

Before proceeding to the issue of how to attain an awakening, it is worth revisiting what your core meditation practice should be. As I have said before, this process is like gardening. You do not make the plants grow. You put into place the conditions in which the plants can grow and thrive. If you till the soil, give it nutrients, mulch it, pull the weeds, prevent insects from destroying your crop, water it and tend to it, the garden will grow. And that will happen in its own good time and at its own pace. You cannot force plants to grow overnight, and you cannot force your mind to develop overnight, either.

So you wake up in the morning, perhaps a little earlier than you used to. After preparing your body for the day, you sit down on your meditation cushion. You chant the "homage to the Buddha." Without the Buddha we would not have this practice, and he discovered this path at an enormous personal cost and effort. The Buddha stated that "regard for noble ones" is necessary condition for practice, and no one is more noble than the Buddha himself:

> *"Here, householder, the instructed noble disciple, who has regard for the noble ones and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma [Dharma], who has regard for the good persons and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma..."* - [SN 41.3]

We have reverence for the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṇgha. We have reverence and respect for our teachers. If you wanted to become a master painter and you have the opportunity to study with Michelangelo, you would certainly have respect and reverence for his skill, and you would feel blessed to be able to learn from him.

Next you chant the refuges. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma,

and the Saṇgha. These are The Three Jewels. They are a safe harbor from the turbulence of life and conditioned existence. They are reliable and solid. We are safe there.

The Saṇgha in this case is the "noble Saṇgha," the community of awakened beings. This goes back to the time of the Buddha and includes his noble disciples Ānanda, Sāriputta, Moggallāna, Pajāpatī, Khema, Kassapa, and so on.

Then you chant the Five Precepts. These are the gift that you give to the world. They are the gift of virtue. By chanting them you embed them in your memory. They act as guardians of the mind.

There was a time in my practice when I had been chanting the precepts on a regular basis, but I had not noticed any particular effect from them. Then one day I was about to take a pen from the office where I worked, and I remembered the precept on not taking what is not freely offered. It is a little thing, but then it is *always* the little things. Practice is all about the little things. If you can learn to take care of the little things, the big things take care of themselves.

Next you chant the Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection. We are all subject to aging, sickness, and death. Someday everything that we know will be left behind. Our homes, our friends, our children, our loved ones, everything will disappear when we die. What we do take with us, however, is the consequences of our actions. This is our karma. We want to live as skillfully as possible so that what we take with us is wholesome and good.

Then we chant the Mettā Sutta, the Buddha's words on loving-kindness. The world is full of hate, anger, and fear. Mettā is the antidote to that. It is a gift that we cultivate in our own hearts and minds. This is a gift to others and ourselves. The answer to fear, hatred, and anger is never more fear, hatred, and anger. You may as well pour gasoline on a fire. Mettā is the water. It puts the fire out.

In the West we use the word "heart," but in Asia they use the word

“citta.” “Citta” means something more like “heart-mind.” Thus the heart and mind are not separate. Where the heart goes the mind will follow, and where the mind goes the heart will follow. In Buddhism there is the term ”bodhicitta.” While literally it means something like “the awakened heart-mind,” it’s real meaning is the heart-mind that aspires to awakening, out of compassion, for the benefit of all beings.

Our final chant is the “Mahamangala Sutta: the discourse on the Highest Blessings.” This is a reminder that what we are doing has inner beauty. This practice does not take anything from anyone, but it gives a great deal to us and to others. If you look closely at what this sutta does, it takes us through a progression of blessings that arise as our practice deepens. And finally in the end there is complete freedom:

> *They who live by following this path*
> *Know victory wherever they go,*
> *And every place for them is safe.*
> *These are the highest blessings.*
> - [Khp 5]

The chanting connects us to Buddhists around the world and throughout time. They remind us of what we are doing and why. They deeply embed the teachings in our minds. They are guardians that keep us from transgressions, large and small. They also bring us into the present moment. Now is not the time to think about work or getting to daycare or paying the mortgage. This is sacred time. This is when we do our most important work.

Then you settle into the meditation. You bring up gratitude in whatever way works for you. You remember why you are practicing, for your benefit and the benefit of others. You offer mettā to yourself. No one is more deserving of your love than you. What you are doing is noble.

Then perhaps, you remember the words of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, words that take you into the meditation:

> *"Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out."* - [MN 10.4]

Presumably by now you have or will in the future do the practices in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the Ānāpānasati Sutta. You will do the meditation on the parts of the body, the elements, the corpse contemplations, and so on. And yes, it can take quite a long time to properly work with all of these meditations.

But we spend years and years and years doing things that do not have nearly the benefits of meditation. I worked for over a decade to afford my first house. I spent years and years cultivating a career. I am not even sure how to measure the time that I spent being a parent. People spend years and years and years getting Ph.D.'s and becoming doctors and lawyers and scholars and master mechanics and skilled craftspeople. And that can all be to their great benefit. A lot of that kind of discipline applies to Dharma practice as well.

But you can't take any of that with you. That is why the Buddha gave us the Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection. This is not to say that you should not do any of those other things. You can learn a great deal from them. I certainly did.

But this time that we spend on the training is priceless. The qualities that we cultivate in Dharma practice we will take with us.

And of course some of these practices can be quite challenging. I was in a group once where we contemplated our own deaths. This was very difficult for some people. But if and when you can do these difficult practices you can eventually overcome your fear.

The practices that I just mentioned are mindfulness practices. These lay the groundwork for attaining jhāna, meditative absorption. And once

you can attain jhāna, you can work your way to the fourth jhāna. In the fourth jhāna there is very little to disturb the mind. And in the fourth jhāna you can go back and forth between being absorbed in the meditation and watching the concentrated mind. This is the fundamental practice, to attain the fourth jhāna and then go back and forth between being there and watching the mind be there.

Of course, this is a gross simplification. Everyone is different. The fourth jhāna is the conventional way in which most people work toward awakening. This may or may not be true for you. But this is the basic outline of where you are likely to be when you are getting close to awakening.

5. Stream-entry

As you probably know by now the Buddha outlined four stages of awakening:

1. Stream-entry
2. Once-returner
3. Non-returner
4. Arahant

And as noted in the section "What is Nirvāṇa" they are usually defined in terms of fetters that are overcome and rebirth.

I am going to concentrate on stream-entry because I think that is where most of you are headed, and once you attain stream-entry the other stages become inevitable.

There is an entire chapter in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* on stream-entry. It is chapter 11 in the *Mahavagga* (the "Great Book") and it is called the "Sotāpattisaṃyutta: The Connected Discourses on Stream-Entry." It contains 63 discourses.

If you read these discourses you will notice two things that are common in the Pāli Canon. One is that there is a lot of repetition. That is one of the complaints that people have when reading the Canon. I think some of that is a function of the meticulousness of the monks and nuns who preserved the suttas. Rather than run the risk of trying to summarize the Buddha's teachings, they chose to preserve them literally.

The second thing a diligent reader will see is that there are subtle differences between some of them. You will see the general themes, but then in some circumstances the Buddha used slightly different wording, and that can give clues to the different ways in which you can think about awakening.

The first discourse in the Sotāpattisaṃyutta is called "Bamboo Gate." It gives a good introduction to what is to follow:

"Although, bhikkhus, a noble disciple maintains himself by lumps of almsfood and wears rag-robes, still, as he possesses four things, he is freed from hell, the animal realm, and the domain of ghosts, freed from the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world.

"What are the four? Here, bhikkhus, the noble disciple possesses confirmed confidence in the Buddha thus: 'The Blessed One is an arahant, perfectly enlightened, accomplished in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the world, unsurpassed leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, the enlightened One, the Blessed One.'

"He possesses confirmed confidence in the Dhamma thus: 'The Dhamma is well expounded by the Blessed One, directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise.'

"He possesses confirmed confidence in the Saṇgha thus: 'The Saṇgha of the Blessed One's disciples is practicing the good way, practicing the straight way, practicing the true way, practicing the proper way; that is, the four pairs of persons, the eight types of individuals — this Saṇgha of the Blessed One's disciples is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of reverential salutation, the unsurpassed field of merit for the world.'

"He possesses the virtues dear to the noble ones — unbroken, untorn, unblemished, unmottled, freeing,

> *praised by the wise, ungrasped, leading to concentration."* - [SN 55.1]

This is the basic formula. A stream-enterer:

1. Possesses confirmed confidence in the Buddha.
2. Possesses confirmed confidence in the Dharma.
3. Possesses confirmed confidence in the Saṇgha.
4. Possesses virtue leading to concentration.

The confidence is "confirmed" (also translated as "verified") because the disciple has seen it for him/herself.

The fourth factor is also quite interesting. It starts with virtue. This is the Five Precepts. As already noted, a stream-enterer is incapable of breaking the Precepts.

Further, this is the virtue that leads to concentration. Virtue is a pre-requisite for concentration, for jhāna. You cannot be bending the principles of moral conduct and expect to attain jhāna. The mind will not be able to settle enough.

So how does one attain "confirmed confidence?"

Here we go to one of the common themes of awakening from the time of the Buddha. If you have read *The Little Book of the Life of the Buddha*, you may recall that the Wheel of the Dharma turned when Koṇḍañña was able to deduce from the teaching on the Four Noble Truths the doctrine of dependent co-arising:

> *This is what the Blessed One said. Elated, the bhikkhus of the group of five delighted in the Blessed One's statement. And while this discourse was being spoken, there arose in the Venerable Kondañña the dust-free, stainless vision of the Dhamma: "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation."* - [SN 56.11]

Many of the early arahants did what Koṇḍañña did. The Buddha taught them the Four Noble Truths and they extrapolated the causal nature of existence.

This is confirmed confidence. The disciple sees that "whatever arises ceases." We live in a universe of causes and effects, not things. Nothing exists permanently, except for nirvāṇa.

This is also the doctrine of emptiness. Emptiness has gotten a lot of play in the Buddhist world, and it is the cause of a great deal of confusion. But if you understand the doctrine of anattā, of non-self, then emptiness is simply that notion applied to the whole of reality. Just as a being is a process, an ever-changing field of causes and results that become causes with further results and so on, the whole of existence is like that. Everything is changing all the time. As with the self, there is nothing that has a permanent essence.

That is why craving/clinging/attachment is such a poor strategy for happiness. If you can let go of the attachment, then you can still enjoy impermanent phenomena. We do this all the time. We enjoy blooming flowers even though we know they will die. In fact, the flower can be even more precious because of its impermanence. About every 10 years there is a "superbloom" of wildflowers in Death Valley. This only happens under special conditions. It lasts for a few weeks, and people come from miles and miles away to see it.

Because we are aware of a flower's brief existence we do not tend to cling to it, so the enjoyment is free of suffering, angst, and stress. Or at least that is true for most people. And in fact, it is the impermanence of the phenomena that is part of the joy of the experience.

We are all subject to aging. We are all subject to sickness. We are all going to die. This is the dance of life. Denying that reality is a sure path to unhappiness. This is why the practices on the body parts, the elements, and the corpse contemplations are a path to happiness, even though that may seem counterintuitive. But in order to see that, you must

view life like the blooming flower. Let go of attachment to this physical existence, and to this physical body. It is going to fail. But that is not the problem. The problem is our inability to be in harmony with the reality that it is going to fail.

This is why what the Buddha taught is so radical. It seems obvious that the physical universe, as well as our very being, have a permanent essence. The universe, as Douglas Adams said, is really big. How could it not be permanent, all those billions of galaxies?

All conditioned things are of a nature to decay. When we see that for ourselves, as Master Dogen said, "the mind and body fall away." There is no mind and body. There is just this energy field, this weather system that we call "me." We are free. We are free from clinging and attachment, we are free from ignorance, and we are free from suffering and stress:

> *At Sāvatthī. "Bhikkhus, form is impermanent. What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is nonself. What is nonself should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.' When one sees this thus as it really is with correct wisdom, the mind becomes dispassionate and is liberated from the taints by nonclinging.*
>
> *"Feeling is impermanent... Perception is impermanent... Volitional formations are impermanent... Consciousness is impermanent. What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is nonself. What is nonself should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.' When one sees this thus as it really is with correct wisdom, the mind becomes dispassionate and is liberated from the taints by nonclinging."* - [SN 22.45]

It seems equally obvious that sense pleasures are the path to happiness.

The practice of jhāna helps us to loosen the attachment to sense pleasures. And when we attain stream-entry we make a sharp turn in a different direction. We see the futility of what seems like an obvious strategy for happiness:

Sensual craving gives rise to grief;
Sensual craving gives rise to fear.
For someone released from sensual craving
There is no grief;
And from where would come fear?
- [Dhp 15]

There are some other interesting twists on the Buddha's teaching in this chapter. One of them is my favored exposition of virtue. In this teaching, there are seven criteria. There is no ban on intoxicants, and the right speech is enumerated into its four components:

"What, householders, is the Dhamma exposition applicable to oneself? Here, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus: 'I am one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die; I desire happiness and am averse to suffering. Since I am one who wishes to live… and am averse to suffering, if someone were to take my life, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to take the life of another — of one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die, who desires happiness and is averse to suffering — that would not be pleasing and agreeable to the other either. What is displeasing and disagreeable to me is displeasing and disagreeable to the other too. How can I inflict upon another what is displeasing and disagreeable to me?' Having reflected thus, he himself abstains from the destruction of life, exhorts others to abstain from the destruction of life, and speaks in praise of abstinence from the destruction of

life. Thus this bodily conduct of his is purified in three respects.

“Again, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus: ‘If someone were to take from me what I have not given, that is, to commit theft, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me…’

“Again, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus: ‘If someone were to commit adultery with my wives, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me…’

“Again, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus: ‘If someone were to damage my welfare with false speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me…’

“Again, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus: ‘If someone were to divide me from my friends by divisive speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me…’

“Again, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus: ‘If someone were to address me with harsh speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me…’

“Again, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus: ‘If someone were to address me with frivolous speech and idle chatter, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me…’

“When, householders, the noble disciple possesses these seven good qualities and these four desirable states, if he wishes he could by himself declare of himself: ‘I am one finished with hell, finished with the animal realm, finished

> *with the domain of ghosts, finished with the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world. I am a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as my destination.'"* - [SN 55.7]

The "four desirable states" are the aforementioned confirmed confidence in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṇgha, and the "virtue leading to concentration." Here the Buddha used the same basic formula, but he elaborated on what virtue is.

I do not want to make light of the Precept on intoxicants. We are always looking for shortcuts. People in the West are fond of asking, "What is wrong with an occasional glass of wine?" But intoxicants predispose us to unskillful behavior. Perhaps if the Buddha gave this discourse a little later in his teaching career there would have been eight good qualities.

Having said that, this situation comes up in the sutta "Sarakāni":

> *Now on that occasion Sarakāni the Sakyan had died, and the Blessed One had declared him to be a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as his destination. Thereupon a number of Sakyans, having met and assembled, deplored this, grumbled, and complained about it, saying: "It is wonderful indeed, sir! It is amazing indeed, sir! Now who here won't be a stream-enterer when the Blessed One has declared Sarakāni the Sakyan after he died to be a stream-enterer… with enlightenment as his destination? Sarakāni the Sakyan was too weak for the training; he drank intoxicating drink!"* - [SN 55.24]

The Buddha responded in this way:

“Mahānāma, when a lay follower has gone for refuge over a long time to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṇgha, how could he go to the nether world? For if one speaking rightly were to say of anyone: ‘He was a lay follower who had gone for refuge over a long time to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṇgha,’ it is of Sarakāni the Sakyan that one could rightly say this. Mahānāma, Sarakāni the Sakyan had gone for refuge over a long time to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṇgha, so how could he go to the nether world?“ - [SN 55.24]

So in this case the Buddha responded that Sarakāni had been a devoted lay follower for a long time. His faith in the Three Jewels was deep enough that his future course was inevitable even if his behavior was less than perfect.

One of the things you can also see in this passage is that the Buddha’s teachings are not a dogma or an ideology. There are guidelines and principles that are based on his experience of the transcendent. Inevitably there are people who try to turn the Dharma into a dogma, a hard and fast set of rules. But this is art, not chemistry. The objective is to produce good art, and that can be done in many ways.

In this same sutta the Buddha outlined other courses that are not stream-entry but do preclude rebirth in the lower realms:

“Here, Mahānāma, some person does not possess confirmed confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṇgha. He is not one of joyous wisdom, nor of swift wisdom, and he has not attained liberation. However, he has these five things: the faculty of faith, the faculty of energy, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of wisdom. And the teachings proclaimed by the Tathāgata are accepted by him after being pondered to a sufficient degree with wisdom. This

person too, Mahānāma, is one who does not go to hell, the animal realm, or the domain of ghosts, to the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world.

"Here, Mahānāma, some person does not possess confirmed confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṇgha. He is not one of joyous wisdom, nor of swift wisdom, and he has not attained liberation. However, he has these five things: the faculty of faith … the faculty of wisdom. And he has sufficient faith in the Tathāgata, sufficient devotion to him. This person too, Mahānāma, is one who does not go to hell, the animal realm, or the domain of ghosts, to the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world." - [SN 55.24]

In the first case the disciple does not have the qualities necessary for stream-entry, but does possess the five faculties, and has reflected on the Buddha's teachings enough to accept that they are true. This does not free them from all future rebirths in the lower realms, however. When the Buddha described the four stages of awakening, he said that such people are "freed from hell, the animal realm, and the domain of ghosts, freed from the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world." Here he only says that this person will not be reborn in the lower realms, presumably in the next rebirth.

The final formula is similar, but in this case the person has "sufficient devotion" to the Buddha to accept his teachings. Likewise, this person is not freed from the lower realms, but will not be reborn there in the next rebirth.

These are still very desirable conditions. In addition to being assured of rebirth in a favorable realm, the implication is that with continued practice these people will attain stream-entry. It is a kind of pre-stream-entry, but with enough positive karmic momentum you can be (somewhat) assured of stream-entry.

This is where the factor of awakening *viriya* (energy, determination, diligence) is important. It is not just your current skill level in the practice that is important, it is your life trajectory. What is your direction and speed? The direction must be toward virtue, concentration, and wisdom, and your speed is the *viriya* with which you pursue that direction.

When you die, if you are not yet a stream-enterer, you will be presented with a series of possible rebirths based on your karma. If you are able, you can pass on all of them and go all the way to full awakening. But if you cannot do this, you should 1) aspire to as high a rebirth as possible and 2) aspire to be able to continue to practice.

6. Personality and Temperament

As we see in the chapter on stream-entry in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Buddha did not give a strict formula for stream-entry. You do not plug a human being in one end and have a stream-enterer come out the other. For example, some people are strong in the faculty of faith. Some are strong in the faculty of wisdom:

> *The disciple enters upon the first supramundane path either as a Dhamma-follower (dhammānusārin) or as a faith-follower (saddhānusārin); the former is one in whom wisdom is the dominant faculty, the latter one who progresses by the impetus of faith.*
>
> - [Bhikkhu Bodhi, Majjhima Nikāya, "Introduction"]

> *"Just as that tender calf just born, being urged on by its mother's lowing, also breasted the stream of the Ganges and got safely across to the further shore, so too, those bhikkhus who are Dhamma-followers and faith-followers — by breasting Māra's stream they too will get safely across to the further shore."* - [MN 34.10]

So right at the start the Buddha made a distinction between people of different inclinations.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu tells a rather humorous story about a woman who read the Buddha's teachings on non-self, and when she visited the monastery she was disappointed to find out that the monks have personalities.

In fact, our true personalities don't have a chance to shine through because they are obscured by greed, aversion, and delusion. If you are angry a lot of the time, the shyer aspects of your personality do not manifest. Negative mind states are powerful, and they overwhelm the positive ones.

We all have different temperaments and different karmas. This means that our paths to awakening and how awakening manifests in each one of us is unique. In the sutta "Foremost" [AN 1.188-267], there are seven chapters, four devoted to monks, and one each to nuns, laymen, and lay women. In each chapter the Buddha lists who among that group is foremost in a particular quality:

> *"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples in seniority is Aññākoṇḍaññā.*
>
> *"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those with great wisdom is Sāriputta.*
>
> *"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those with psychic potency is Mahāmoggallāna.*
>
> *"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those who expound the ascetic practices is Mahākassapa.*
>
> *"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those with the divine eye is Anuruddha.*
>
> *"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those from eminent families is Bhaddiya Kāḷigodhāyaputta.*
>
> *"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those with a sweet voice is Lakuṇṭaka Bhaddiya.*
>
> *"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among*

those with the lion's roar is Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those who speak on the Dhamma is Puṇṇa Mantāṇiputta.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those who explain in detail the meaning of what has been stated in brief is Mahākaccāna."

– [AN 1.188-197]

And so on for three more chapters. The sutta continues with nuns, the *bhikkhunīs*:

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples in seniority is Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those with great wisdom is Khemā.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those with psychic potency is Uppalavaṇṇā.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those who uphold the discipline is Paṭācārā.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among speakers on the Dhamma is Dhammadinnā.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among meditators is Nandā.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those who arouse energy is Soṇā.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among

those with the divine eye is Sakulā.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those who quickly attain direct knowledge is Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those who recollect past lives is Bhaddā Kāpilānī.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those who attain great direct knowledge is Bhaddā Kaccānā.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those who wear coarse robes is Kisāgotamī.

"Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those resolved through faith is Sigālamātā."

– [AN 235-247]

(Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was the Buddha's stepmother, the one who raised him.)

The sutta continues with lay people.

Thus we all come to the Dharma in a different way, and the Dharma expresses itself in each of us in a different way.

Ajahn Chah once said, "We are all the same. But we are all different. But we are all the same."

We have the same disease, and it works the same way in all of us. But we all have unique temperaments, unique strengths and weaknesses, unique personalities. The precise door that we use to end our suffering will not be the same. The Buddha's two chief disciples were Moggallāna and

Sāriputta, and while they were best friends, they were also quite different. As you can see in the sutta, Sāriputta was foremost in wisdom. Sāriputta would have made a great organic chemist or quantum physicist. Moggallāna was foremost in psychic powers. He would have been a great fortuneteller or magician, maybe a fantastic stockbroker.

One of the things that happens as you practice is that you stop self-identifying with your temperament. Whatever your temperament is, some people will like it, some people won't like it, and some people won't care. It isn't who you are, it is just how you are constructed in this lifetime. On the path to awakening, you get to know it better, you learn how to make it work for you, and you stop worrying about whether it is good or bad or right or wrong.

I heard this story about a Zen Master and one of his students. The Zen Master had this dynamic personality, and the student was rather shy and retiring. One day the student asked his teacher, "If I become enlightened, will I be like you?" "No," the Master replied. "I was just born this way."

If you have bricks, you build a brick house. If you have wood, you build a wooden house.

Your path to awakening will not follow a precise formula. On the other hand, the end game is the same, and that is to end the process of fabrication. There is a map, but the map cannot tell you what your trip will be like, or the precise route you will take.

7. The Many Moving Parts

“Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu develops right view, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. He develops right intention… right speech… right action… right livelihood… right effort… right mindfulness… right concentration, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release.” - [SN 45.2]

Miyagi: What matter?
Daniel: I’m just scared. The tournament and everything.
Miyagi: You remember lesson about balance?
Daniel: Yeah.
Miyagi: Lesson not just karate only. Lesson for whole life. Whole life have a balance. Everything be better. Understand?

- [“The Karate Kid”]

It is easy to get consumed by one part of the practice and to make that the whole of your practice. But this is a multifaceted practice with a lot of moving parts. We start with our conduct: virtue, ethics, morality. We put our good conduct on a ground of generosity. We follow the lay precepts. Monks have over 200 precepts; nuns have over 300. We examine the results of our actions and try to do only what is skillful, what is of benefit to ourselves and others now and in the future. We work on our intention, because skillful intention is the heart of good karma. In the Noble Eightfold Path, parts three, four, and five are about right conduct.

Then we meditate. We have three major parts to meditation, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, Mindfulness of Breathing, and jhāna. We

weave them together like three different colors of yarn into a whole tapestry. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness show us the lay of the land. Mindfulness of Breathing takes us all the way to an awakening in the fourth tetrad. And jhāna starts as a challenging goal to attain, and then becomes the springboard to stream-entry. In the Noble Eightfold Path, parts six, seven, and eight are about meditation.

Right Understanding starts out as mundane right view: the Four Noble Truths, dependent co-arising, the law of karma, the Three Marks of Existence. As our practice grows we see them for ourselves. We see how our minds work in unskillful ways. As our practice progresses, mundane right view becomes transcendent right understanding. In the Noble Eightfold Path, parts one and two are right view.

These are the pieces of the puzzle, and we develop them together. I once saw this stage act where a man started with a bunch of sticks and a stack of plates. One by one he picked up a stick and a plate and started the plate spinning on the end of the stick. He then took the stick with the spinning plate and inserted it into a holder on a table. After a while he got about 15 of these spinning plates on the table.

Eventually one of the plates would start to wobble and he gave it another spin to keep it going. With 15 of them going he had to keep a watchful eye on them, and when one started to wobble he had to run over to that one and give it a whirl.

Practice is like that. One part of your practice is going well, and then you find yourself engaged in wrong speech. Then you do something kind and generous, but you can't concentrate. You try to understand dependent co-arising and you can't make any sense of it, but your sitting is calm and relaxed.

So you keep a watchful eye on it all, and when one of the plates starts to wobble, you give it some extra attention; you give it a whirl. In this way you keep all the moving parts going.

The danger in not developing the whole path is that you lose site of the

main objective. You go from creating mischief of the old sort to creating mischief of a new sort. There is a well-known meditation center where every year they hold a retreat for people whose sole practice is trying to attain the deathless. They just sit all day long trying to go from A to Z, skipping those pesky steps B through Y. They do not practice the whole of the gradual path, the Noble Eightfold Path. And according to the people who work at the retreat center, they are insufferable.

So develop your practice as a whole. It is like going 55 mph on the highway. If the car speeds up, you back off of the gas. If the car slows down, give it more gas. You really can't go 90 in this practice. Your mind won't tolerate it. That may even slow you down. This is about developing in an optimal way, not a maximal one. If you go 55 you will get there safely, without wasting any energy, and in good time.

8. Conditions for Stream-entry

> *"Bhikkhus, these four things, when developed and cultivated, lead to the realization of the fruit of stream-entry. What four? Association with superior persons, hearing the true Dhamma, careful attention, practice in accordance with the Dhamma. These four things, when developed and cultivated, lead to the realization of the fruit of stream-entry."* - [SN 55:5]

As with much of this path, you cannot make stream-entry happen. What you do is create the conditions, the "proximal causes," in which stream entry can arise. And the Buddha told us what those conditions are:

1. Association with superior persons
2. Hearing the true Dharma
3. Careful (appropriate) attention
4. Practice in accordance with the Dharma

Association With Superior Persons

> *Be respectful to your superiors, if you have any; also to strangers, and sometimes to others.*
>
> - [Mark Twain, "Advice to Youth"]

There is significance to the order in which the Buddha gave us the conditions for stream-entry. He began with "association with superior persons." The most superior persons are arahants. They are the inspiration for what is possible for us. We see their impeccable behavior. We want to be like them. And for many people this is how their practice

starts.

I heard a story years ago about a woman who eventually became a Zen master. She had a Ph.D., she was a tenured college professor, had a good marriage, and so on. But still she felt that there was something lacking in her life. As I recall she said something like, "This is it? This is all there is to life?" So one evening she went to a talk by a Zen master.

When she entered the hall he was actually there greeting people. He looked her in the eye and gave her a very warm welcome. She was overwhelmed by the power of his presence. After she sat down in the hall she turned to her friend and said, "What was *that*?" If you have not had the experience of being in the presence of someone who is awake, then I hope you will. It can be quite overpowering.

There is the famous conversation between Ānanda and the Buddha, in which the Buddha said that the whole of the holy life is good friendship:

> *"Venerable sir, this is half of the holy life, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship."*
>
> *"Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path."* - [SN 45.2]

Admirable friends give us examples of what it means to have virtue, what it means to have concentration, and what it means to have wisdom. The best friends are also able to show us our failings in a loving and tactful way. The best friend is one who knows how to wisely criticize.

In our spiritual journey, there are companions who are peers, and there are companions who are teachers, people who have a practice that is more advanced than ours. Of course, sometimes the distinction is

somewhat arbitrary, but clearly there are people who are our mentors. So while an arahant is the best kind of superior person, anyone who is more advanced than us can be a superior person and help us along the path.

It is not, of course, necessarily easy to recognize a superior person. The Buddha gave a discourse in which he said that in order to recognize a person of integrity, you must be one yourself:

> *"Could a person of no integrity know of a person of integrity: 'This is a person of integrity?'"*
>
> *"No, lord."*
>
> *"Bhikkhus, an untrue man is possessed of bad qualities; he associates as an untrue man, he wills as an untrue man, he counsels as an untrue man, he speaks as an untrue man, he acts as an untrue man, he holds views as an untrue man, and he gives gifts as an untrue man.*
>
> *"And how is an untrue man possessed of bad qualities? Here an untrue man has no faith, no shame, no fear of wrongdoing; he is unlearned, lazy, forgetful, and unwise. That is how an untrue man is possessed of bad qualities."*
> - [MN 110.3-4]

This goes back to the necessity of being an honest person, a person of integrity. So often we latch onto some person who has charisma, what Robert Thurman calls a "cute person," because we are looking for someone else to solve our problems of living. Someone who is charismatic or is entertaining or has funny stories is not necessarily wise. But as usual in the Buddha's teaching, we start by looking outwards, and then we are directed back inwards.

This brings us to the topic of teachers.

Finding a teacher is difficult. People who are on a spiritual path are

vulnerable, and this can make us put trust into untrustworthy people. Bad teachers can seriously damage students. In the Buddhist world there are sad examples of teachers who took advantage of their students sexually, financially, and emotionally. The dynamic is very fragile.

Some years ago I heard Larry Rosenberg say that he is always surprised at how many otherwise intelligent, capable, successful people check their common sense at the door when it comes to their spiritual practice.

Being a teacher is a heady experience. That is a great danger. You start to think you know more than you do. And curiously in the West it seems like as soon as someone starts to meditate, they want to be a teacher. I have never understood that, but there it is. I cannot remember a single instance in the Pāli Canon of someone aspiring to be a teacher. Being a teacher during the Buddha's time was a side effect of awakening. And not all the arahants taught. Moggallāna was a gifted teacher. Anuruddha chose to live in solitude, to be a "paccekabuddha," a "silent Buddha."

I recently heard a Dharma talk by someone who rather haughtily recounted his time at an Asian monastery. But it was also clear to me that his understanding of the Dharma was poor. In fact his entire talk was about himself. And at the end of his talk he proudly announced that he was about to start teacher training. All I could think was that he should undergo student training.

I heard Larry Rosenberg talk about this problem many years ago. He talked about how teachers get such reverence and praise, even when sometimes they do not deserve it. He said that it is very hard not to start believing your own press clippings, as it where.

They have a wonderful practice in Burma, and that is where a monk who is preaching sits behind a large bamboo fan. This keeps the talk from being about the monk and his personality.

Figure: Preaching Monk

In the West we also have a culture of Dharma for hire. You go to a retreat where they say that the teachings are "freely offered." But the retreat center charges hundreds or thousands of dollars, and at the end of the retreat they ask you to give even more money to support the center and the teachers. This is the famous "dana talk." This is the teacher's livelihood. It is how they earn a living.

When you pay for something, you expect something in return. You want decent accommodations. You want good food. You want entertainment. You want your money's worth. You want to be comfortable. I went to a retreat once where a woman told me in a quite animated fashion how bad the food at a certain retreat center used to be, but fortunately that center had "finally gotten its act together." This is a far cry from the

teachings of the Buddha, where we are grateful for all that is freely offered. There are 3.1 million children in the world under the age of five who die each year from malnutrition. I am sure they would be more than happy to eat that bad food.

This financial dynamic has made Buddhism a white, middle class phenomenon in the United States. It is a Dharma class system. Some people have a lot of money, so they pay extra. Some people have almost no money. They are on scholarship, or they do work jobs to pay for their retreat. By the end of a retreat, you know who is who. It's like an Ivy League college. There are some people on scholarship, and everyone else has rich parents.

The most diverse retreats that I ever attended were free. Then the unit of measure is the quality of your practice. I went to one such retreat where there was a lovely older woman from Sri Lanka. She was partly crippled. But her heart was so big. I sat next to her, and it was a humbling experience. This is true Dharma, and you won't see people like that at a meditation country club.

The Buddha and his monks and his nuns never charged. They only asked, as Robert Thurman likes to put it, for one free lunch per day. If they didn't get alms food they didn't eat; if they didn't get robes they made do. And if they misbehaved, the laity stopped supporting them. The "Kosambiya Sutta: The Kosambians" [MN 48] tells the story of some quarreling monks who would not even listen to the Buddha. Eventually the people in the town refused to feed them. It was a pretty good system of checks and balances.

The Buddha was sensitive to the abuses of religious authority. That is why the Vinaya is so specific about what monks and nuns can do. In the "Cula-hatthipadopama Sutta: The Shorter Elephant Footprint Simile" [MN 22] he gave a lengthy description of how hard it is to know if a Buddha is genuine. Knowing a true teacher is not easy. You must spend a lot of time with someone before you know if they are a trustworthy.

This runs counter to how some Buddhist traditions evolved. The idea of a guru - someone to whom you give absolute authority - is missing from the Buddha's teachings. I call this "creeping Hinduism." In the first millennium there was a lot of cross-pollination in India between Buddhism and Hinduism. Today in Asia there are places where it is hard to tell the two apart. The word "guru" literally means "teacher," but it comes from the Hindu tradition, and in Hinduism the guru "imparts transcendent knowledge."

This is not how it works in the Buddha's system. The Buddha is a guide showing us the way over a mountain pass. He points the way, but you make the journey, and you do it under your own power.

> *The Buddha says "my teaching is not a dogma or a doctrine, but no doubt some people will take it as such." The Buddha goes on to say "I must state clearly that my teaching is a method to experience reality and not reality itself, just as a finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. A thinking person makes use of the finger to see the moon. A person who only looks at the finger and mistakes it for the moon will never see the real moon."*
>
> - [Thich Nhat Hanh, *Old Path, White Clouds*]

You must know that your guide knows how to get you there. In the "Cankī Sutta: With Cankī" [MN 95] the Buddha gave instructions on how to determine if a teacher is worthy, and if a teaching is worthy:

> *"Here, Bhāradvāja, a bhikkhu may be living in dependence on some village or town. Then a householder or a householder's son goes to him and investigates him in regard to three kinds of states: in regard to states based on greed, in regard to states based on hate, and in regard to states based on delusion: 'Are there in this venerable one any states based on greed such that, with*

his mind obsessed by those states, while not knowing he might say, "I know," or while not seeing he might say, "I see," or he might urge others to act in a way that would lead to their harm and suffering for a long time?' As he investigates him he comes to know: 'There are no such states based on greed in this venerable one. The bodily behavior and the verbal behavior of this venerable one are not those of one affected by greed. And the Dhamma that this venerable one teaches is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. This Dhamma cannot easily be taught by one affected by greed.'" - [MN 95.17]

But the Buddha also cautioned that it is not necessarily easy to know a person of integrity. I was at a retreat once where a very sincere young man told a heart-wrenching story about how he spent many years at an Ashram in India only to ultimately find out that his teacher was quite cruel. You have to be on your guard. It may take a long time to find a person of integrity.

"Bhikkhus, four facts [about people] can be known from four [other] facts. What four?

(1) "By dwelling together their virtuous behavior can be known, and this only after a long time, not casually; by one who is attentive, not by one who is inattentive; and by one who is wise, not by one who is unwise.

(2) "By dealing [with them] their integrity can be known, and this only after a long time, not casually; by one who is attentive, not by one who is inattentive; and by one who is wise, not by one who is unwise.

(3) "In misfortune their fortitude can be known, and this only after a long time, not casually; by one who is attentive, not by one who is inattentive; and by one who is wise, not by one who is unwise.

(4) "By conversation their wisdom can be known, and this only after a long time, not casually; by one who is attentive, not by one who is inattentive; and by one who is wise, not by one who is unwise." - [AN 4.192]

There is "bad spiritual friendship," or simply, "bad friendship." Spending time with people of dubious character will make following this path extremely difficult. It is hard to find good spiritual companionship. Sometimes this is subtle. I have belonged to Dharma groups where I finally realized that they were holding me back.

The Buddha himself said that if you cannot find compatible spiritual friends, you are better off going it alone:

If, while on your way,
You meet no one your equal or better,
Steadily continue on your way alone.
There is no fellowship with fools.
- [Dhp 61]

It is better to have a community of 0 or 1 than it is to have a big community that is holding you back. But you are never really practicing alone. You have the company of the Buddha and the arahants, maybe even some devas. Devas like to hang around good people, people of integrity and sincerity.

Hearing the True Dharma

Good friends inspire us to follow the path and give us an example of what is possible. Then we must learn how to practice properly. We do

that by hearing the true Dharma:

> *Therefore one desiring his own good, aspiring for spiritual greatness, should deeply revere the true Dhamma, recollecting the Buddha's teaching.* - [SN 6.564]

The word "hearing" is used because at the time of the Buddha the discourses were memorized. It was an oral tradition. The Pāli language, in which the original discourses were preserved, does not even have a native alphabet.

Today instead of the word "hearing" we might say "reading," so the modern understanding is "reading the true Dharma," although a talk that is in accordance with the Buddha's teachings is also true Dharma. But for the moment let's concentrate on the Buddha's own words from the discourses.

I only know one way to know true Dharma and that is to read and study the Pāli Canon. That may seem like a tall order. But please, take the time to at least read the *Majjhima Nikāya*. Be patient and persistent. The first time that I read the *Majjhima Nikāya* it took me a year. Read all the footnotes. You cannot really understand it otherwise. And if you want additional help listen to Bhikkhu Bodhi's talks on the *Majjhima Nikāya*. (Internet search: "Systematic study Majjhima Nikaya") It took me several years to listen to them all. I got into the habit of listening to them in the car, although the audio quality of many of the early ones is poor and I could not always understand them over the road noise.

I have written this before and I will repeat it. While the Pāli Canon may not perfectly preserve every word the Buddha spoke, if you read it you will see its "coherence and cogence," as the early European scholars phrased it. And you will see for yourself what he taught. Then you do not have to take my word for it or anyone else's, either.

The Buddha himself suggested that the only way to know true Dharma was to become familiar with the suttas and the "discipline" (the monastic

code, the *Vinaya*):

> *"Suppose a monk were to say: 'Friends, I heard and received this from the Lord's own lips: this is the Dhamma, this is the discipline, this is the Master's teaching,' then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove his words. Then, without approving or disapproving, his words and expressions should be carefully noted and compared with the Suttas and reviewed in the light of the discipline. If they, on such comparison and review, are found not to conform to the Suttas or the discipline, the conclusion must be: 'Assuredly this is not the word of the Buddha, it has been wrongly understood by this monk,' and the matter is to be rejected. But where on such comparison and review they are found to conform to the Suttas or the discipline, the conclusion must be: 'Assuredly this is the word of the Buddha, it has been rightly understood by this monk.'"* - [DN 16.4.8]

My own journey really began when I read the *Majjhima Nikāya*, and I realized that this was not what Dharma teachers had been telling me.

When I first started practicing meditation, it never occurred to me that what I was being taught might not be in accord with the Buddha's teaching. It all *felt* right. My intuition was that even though I was struggling to understand meditation and the Buddha's teachings, I never doubted that what I was hearing was the Buddha's Dharma. Hearing the true Dharma turned out to be one of the most challenging parts of my entire career as a meditator.

I went to a retreat a few years ago where the retreatants were all very experienced practitioners, and at one point we were discussing the things we were told at retreats that we knew were not true. As Buddhism in the West has grown, sometimes the teachers have not kept up. Sometimes

what they learned was wrong to begin with, and now they have to unlearn that before they can learn what is true. We know a lot more now than we did 20 or 30 or 40 years ago, and the average student is often quite sophisticated. And as I found out at that retreat, sometimes the students know a lot more than the teachers.

But this is not just a modern day Western problem. In the centuries that followed the Buddha's parinibbāna, a lot of revisionism took place. The commentaries and later writings are often at odds with what the Buddha taught. This is why it is important to go back to the original sources. The best source for the Buddha's teachings is his own words.

We are blessed to have good translations of the Pāli Canon. The Internet is an extraordinary resource. We also have eBook versions of the Canon. This makes it easy to find specific passages, and to verify things we are told.

(Do an Internet search for "fake buddha quotes." It is illuminating.)

There are many academic discussions about what parts of the Canon are the earliest. The implication is that the earliest parts of the Canon are the most authentic. But just because something is later doesn't mean that it is inauthentic. A better test is to read the Canon, to understand it as best you can, and to put it into practice. If you start getting too technical about the literature you miss the point, which is to pursue the training and to end suffering. If you know that you can take I-40 to get from North Carolina to New Mexico, you don't really care how it was built.

The Buddha was a practical person. He was not attempting to explain metaphysics. He was not trying to give a scientific or mathematical treatise on how everything works. He wasn't trying to tell us how I-40 was built. He was teaching us a way to solve our fundamental problem of living:

> *This leads on to the misconception that the Buddha was a philosopher, in the sense in which that term has been*

used in the Western tradition. I am not the only person to have insisted that he makes it quite plain that his interest was purely pragmatic: he intended to help people and only attempted to teach the truth to the extent that it was helpful; further speculation he tended to discourage...

...because of this pragmatic intent, the Buddha (unlike most philosophers) aimed not at what we would call mathematical accuracy, but only at engineering accuracy. For example, he taught that the laws of causation in the world show that things do not happen at random, while on the other extreme, determinism is false. Otherwise there could not be the moral choice on which the law of karma depends. Free will, and hence moral responsibility, must lie somewhere between these two extremes, but it was pointless to try to define exactly where. I believe that the Abhidharma, which codified and categorized the teachings while stripping out metaphor, tended to misinterpret the Buddha by attributing mathematical accuracy to his statements, when that was not his intention. One example of this may be that the Abhidharma says that nirvāṇa is always an identical phenomenon. I think this is more specific than the Buddha was.

- ["What the Buddha Taught: An Interview with Richard Gombrich", Fall 2012 Tricycle Magazine]

In order to know that you are hearing the true Dharma, you must be diligent. But approach it with curiosity and a certain lightness. Work as hard as you can to understand what you are reading, but when you sit, keep it simple.

Careful Attention

The third thing the Buddha told us that we need is "careful attention," also called "appropriate attention" and "wise attention."

> *"Bhikkhus, I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen wholesome qualities to arise and arisen unwholesome qualities to decline as careful attention. For one who attends carefully, unarisen wholesome qualities arise and arisen unwholesome qualities decline."* - [AN 1.67]

Appropriate attention means knowing to what to attend, and how to attend to it. We are attending to the wholesome, and not attending to the unwholesome. We are abandoning the hindrances and sprinkling water on the Three Fires. We are cultivating the factors of awakening. We are attending with right intention and right view as our foundation. That is appropriate attention.

Note that this is "appropriate attention," not "bare attention" as is commonly taught:

> *As he defined the term, right mindfulness (sammā-sati) is not bare attention. Instead, it's a faculty of active memory, adept at calling to mind and keeping in mind instructions and intentions that will be useful on the path. Its role is to draw on right view and to work proactively in supervising the other factors of the path to give rise to right concentration, and in using right concentration as a basis for total release.*
>
> - [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Right Mindfulness*]

You might also call this "informed attention," or "educated attention." It is informed by your study of the Buddha's discourses and by your own

direct experience, what you have learned from your meditation.

The Buddha also told us that there is "careless attention." This is attention that gives rise to unwholesome states, in particular the hindrances:

> *"And what, bhikkhus, is the nutriment for the arising of unarisen sensual desire and for the increase and expansion of arisen sensual desire? There is, bhikkhus, the sign of the beautiful: frequently giving careless attention to it is the nutriment for the arising of unarisen sensual desire and for the increase and expansion of arisen sensual desire."* - [SN 46.51]

The Buddha repeated this formula for the other hindrances: ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt.

If you are sitting on the cushion fantasizing, that is careless attention.

In the same sutta the Buddha said that careful attention gives rise to the factors of awakening:

> *"And what, bhikkhus, is the nutriment for the arising of the unarisen enlightenment factor of mindfulness and for the fulfillment by development of the arisen enlightenment factor of mindfulness? There are, bhikkhus, things that are the basis for the enlightenment factor of mindfulness: frequently giving careful attention to them is the nutriment for the arising of the unarisen enlightenment factor of mindfulness and for the fulfillment by development of the arisen enlightenment factor of mindfulness."*

As with the formula for careless attention, the Buddha repeated this phrase for the other factors of awakening: discrimination of states,

energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

Elsewhere the Buddha said that careful attention gives rise to right view:

> *"Friend, there are two conditions for the arising of right view: the voice of another and [careful] attention. These are the two conditions for the arising of right view."* - [MN 43.13]

In practice this means that when you are attending to your current actions, which could be thoughts, words, or deeds, you need to then discern whether you are attending skillfully or not. If you are simply being with whatever arises, and those mind states are unskillful, then you must take corrective action.

It is true that sometimes the best that you can do is to watch what is happening. For example, if fear arises, you may try mettā. That is the normal antidote to fear. But no matter how much mettā you practice the fear may still be overwhelming. In that case the best that you can do may be to develop what equanimity that you can and simply be with it. But eventually you would like to be able to use mettā to overcome the fear. That is skill. That is training the mind.

Appropriate attention is seeing what arises, and then discerning whether it is wholesome or not. If it is wholesome then you use your energy to sustain it, and if it is unwholesome you apply the antidote.

But it is definitely not "bare" or "non-judgmental." It's "judgmental attention," using, of course, good judgment.

Practicing Dharma in Accordance With the Dharma

Finally, there is practicing Dharma in accordance with the Dharma.

This may be a little confusing at first. How, you might ask, can one

practice the Dharma in a way that is not in accordance with the Dharma?

We have discussed one case, where people teach the Dharma as a way of earning a living. The Dharma should be taught as a way to help others attain awakening. Money should never be a part of the equation. Charging money is not practicing Dharma in accordance with the Dharma.

Behaving in a virtuous way is practicing Dharma in accordance with the Dharma. Practicing meditation and then breaking the precepts is not. Virtue is an important part of this equation. When the Buddha discussed practicing Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, he usually meant virtue:

> *"It is by reason of conduct in accordance with the Dhamma, by reason of righteous conduct that some beings here, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world."* - [MN 41.5]

In the "Sāleyyaka Sutta: The Brahmins of Sālā" the Buddha went into some detail on this subject:

> *"Householders, there are three kinds of bodily conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, unrighteous conduct. There are four kinds of verbal conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, unrighteous conduct. There are three kinds of mental conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, unrighteous conduct.*
>
> *"And how, householders, are there three kinds of bodily conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, unrighteous conduct? Here someone kills living beings; he is murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence, merciless to living beings. He takes what is not given; he*

takes by way of theft the wealth and property of others in the village or forest. He misconducts himself in sensual pleasures; he has intercourse with women who are protected by their mother, father, mother and father, brother, sister, or relatives, who have a husband, who are protected by law, and even with those who are garlanded in token of betrothal. That is how there are three kinds of bodily conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, unrighteous conduct.

“And how, householders, are there four kinds of verbal conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, unrighteous conduct? Here someone speaks falsehood; when summoned to a court, or to a meeting, or to his relatives’ presence, or to his guild, or to the royal family’s presence, and questioned as a witness thus: ‘So, good man, tell what you know,’ not knowing, he says, ‘I know,’ or knowing, he says, ‘I do not know’; not seeing, he says, ‘I see,’ or seeing, he says, ‘I do not see’; in full awareness he speaks falsehood for his own ends, or for another’s ends, or for some trifling worldly end. He speaks maliciously; he repeats elsewhere what he has heard here in order to divide [those people] from these, or he repeats to these people what he has heard elsewhere in order to divide [these people] from those; thus he is one who divides those who are united, a creator of divisions, who enjoys discord, rejoices in discord, delights in discord, a speaker of words that create discord. He speaks harshly; he utters such words as are rough, hard, hurtful to others, offensive to others, bordering on anger, unconducive to concentration. He is a gossip; he speaks at the wrong time, speaks what is not fact, speaks what is useless, speaks contrary to the Dhamma and the

Discipline; at the wrong time he speaks such words as are worthless, unreasonable, immoderate, and unbeneficial. That is how there are four kinds of verbal conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, unrighteous conduct.

"And how, householders, are there three kinds of mental conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, unrighteous conduct? Here someone is covetous; he covets the wealth and property of others thus: 'Oh, may what belongs to another be mine!' Or he has a mind of ill will and intentions of hate thus: 'May these beings be slain and slaughtered, may they be cut off, perish, or be annihilated!' Or he has wrong view, distorted vision, thus: 'There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit or result of good and bad actions; no this world, no other world; no mother, no father; no beings who are reborn spontaneously; no good and virtuous recluses and brahmins in the world who have themselves realized by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world.' That is how there are three kinds of mental conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, unrighteous conduct. So, householders, it is by reason of such conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, by reason of such unrighteous conduct that some beings here on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell." - [MN 41.7-10]

None of this should look surprising by now. He started by enumerating the seven aspects of virtue: non-killing, not taking what is not freely offered, and behaving in a sexually irresponsible way. This is followed by the four kinds of verbal misconduct: lying, speech that causes discord, abusive speech, and idle speech (gossip).

Then he described the three kinds of mental misconduct: covetousness, ill will, and wrong view. Once again we see the importance of right view, of not distorting the Buddha's teachings. He gave specific examples of wrong view: there is nothing given or received (karma), that there are no beings who are reborn "spontaneously" (in non-human realms), and that there are no awakened beings, no noble ones.

The Buddha described the practice of virtue here. He did not include concentration (jhāna), wisdom (discernment, or insight), mindfulness, or any other meditation practice. It is about behaving in a noble and exemplary way.

9. Barriers to Stream-entry

> *"Bhikkhus, the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus is clear... free of patchwork. In the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus, which is clear... free of patchwork, those bhikkhus who have abandoned three fetters are all stream-enterers, no longer subject to perdition, bound [for deliverance] and headed for enlightenment."* - [MN 22.45]

In brief, the Buddha's path to awakening is that a) we replace sense pleasure with the pleasure of jhāna, and then b) we use the still mind to see increasingly subtle phenomena in the mind. This is *samatha-vipassana*, serenity and insight arising "yoked together." As the mind gets more still, we see into the process of fabrication, the process whereby we create our own experience. Finally, all that is left is a subtle intention, and we let go of that as well.

There are a number of traps that can keep us from entering the stream. As discussed, the first way is that we do not develop our practice in a balanced way. I know someone who is a master at jhāna. He can go back and forth, up and down through jhānas one through eight like he is playing a video game. And he has been trying for years, with enormous effort, to become a stream-enterer, and he cannot.

When he talks about the Dharma I can see why. He does not understand the teaching on non-self (he is an annihilationist) and he holds many wrong views. He has a somewhat abrasive personality. He is opinionated. He seems pretty impressed with himself. Any one of these would be a barrier to stream-entry.

Another possibility is that you get stuck in jhāna. If you do not understand the whole path, you can end your meditation career at the

mastery of jhāna. I think that for most people who have read and understood the role of jhāna in the Buddha's teachings this would be unusual. But if you do not understand the larger context, then it is quite possible to get stuck there. You may even misinterpret the experience to be something greater than it is. This has happened quite a lot over the centuries. You may recall that it happened to the Buddha's first two teachers.

Something else that can happen, especially if you master the immaterial jhānas, is that you may have "psychic experiences." You may even develop supernormal powers. This is one of the more esoteric parts of the practice:

> *"If a bhikkhu should wish: 'May I wield the various kinds of supernormal power: having been one, may I become many; having been many, may I become one; may I appear and vanish; may I go unhindered through a wall, through an enclosure, through a mountain as though through space; may I dive in and out of the earth as though it were water; may I walk on water without sinking as though it were earth; seated cross-legged, may I travel in space like a bird; with my hand may I touch and stroke the moon and sun so powerful and mighty; may I wield bodily mastery, even as far as the Brahma-world…'*
>
> *"If a bhikkhu should wish: 'May I, with the divine ear element, which is purified and surpasses the human, hear both kinds of sounds, the divine and the human, those that are far as well as near…'*
>
> *"If a bhikkhu should wish: 'May I understand the minds of other beings, of other persons, having encompassed them with my own mind…'*
>
> *"If a bhikkhu should wish: 'May I recollect my manifold*

past lives, that is, one birth, two births...Thus with their aspects and their particulars may I recollect my manifold past lives...'

"If a bhikkhu should wish: 'May I, with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, see beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate; may I understand how beings pass on according to their actions thus...'" - [MN 6.14-18]

Supernormal powers are a recurring topic in the Pāli Canon.

There are people, even non-meditators, who can read minds. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu says that he always thought that his teacher, Ajahn Fuang, could read minds because whenever he went to Ajahn Fuang about a problem, he already knew what Ṭhānissaro was going to ask him. And if you wonder why Ṭhānissaro does not actually know if Ajahn Fuang could read minds, it is because monks and nuns are forbidden to discuss their meditative accomplishments or any superpowers that they have. This is one of the earliest rules in the monastic code.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu also tells this rather amusing story about a cleaning woman at his monastery in Thailand who could read minds. She once told another of the senior monks, "You just won't believe what the monks are thinking when they are supposed to be meditating!"

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu also says that he knows a monk who saw into his previous six lives one night while he was meditating.

The psychic power that is most popularly known is the ability to walk through walls. (Watch "Kung Fu.") So imagine that you are able to hold your mind in the realm of infinite space. We know that all physical objects are almost entirely space. We know that only 4% of the universe is material, that the rest is dark matter. Imagine that you can hold that image of space in your mind.

Some people have an affinity for both the formless attainments and one or more supernormal powers. Mahāmoggallāna - who was one of the Buddha's two chief disciples - was "foremost among those with psychic potency" [AN 1.190]. However, Mahāmoggallāna was an arahant, so he had already attained a full awakening. This also happens sometimes. After someone becomes an arahant, they develop one of these powers. (The Buddha could do all of them.) However, if someone develops supernormal powers before awakening, they may get so wrapped up in them they never progress beyond that point.

If you have read *The Little Book of Buddhist Rebirth* you know that many people experience "psychic events," especially experiences with devas. These can be quite helpful if you understand them in the proper context. However, they can be very unreliable and very seductive. I mean, imagine talking to the gods (!).

All of these types of experiences can be very powerful. They can be extremely helpful if you use them to see the possibilities of practice, to see the bigger picture, to open to the possibilities, and to see that they tell you what the Buddha taught is true. But they do not necessarily mean that you are a more skilled meditator than someone who does not have these experiences. If they become a distraction, quite the opposite will be true. Many exceptionally advanced meditators never have these experiences, even the formless jhānas.

10. Dispassion

We start in the world of sense desire, and the Buddha told us something that seems to go beyond all reason. It is something counter-intuitive. He told us that sense desire is at the heart of the problem.

As our practice evolves, we replace sense desire with the desire born of seclusion, jhāna. Jhāna is peaceful, calm, serene, uncomplicated, and it does not have the dangers inherent in sense desire. There are no crimes of dispassion.

That is one of the things that the Buddha told us about sense desire, that there are dangers involved:

> *"Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, I too clearly saw as it actually is with proper wisdom how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, but as long as I still did not attain to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I still could be attracted to sensual pleasures. But when I clearly saw as it actually is with proper wisdom how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, and I attained to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I was no longer attracted to sensual pleasures."* - [MN 14.5]

Now we have something better, much better. And as we get better at

practicing jhāna, we see for ourselves the danger in sense desire. There is all that bad behavior in the world because people either want something, they hate something, or they are simply confused.

Seeing the danger in sense desire evolves as your practice matures. When you see the danger, you develop dispassion.

> *"And what have I declared? 'This is suffering' - I have declared. 'This is the origin of suffering' - I have declared. 'This is the cessation of suffering' - I have declared. 'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering' - I have declared.*
>
> *"Why have I declared that? Because it is beneficial, it belongs to the fundamentals of the holy life, it leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna. That is why I have declared it."* - [MN 63.9-10]

We tend to think of "passion" as a good thing. The things about which we care the most are the things for which we have a passion. We may even have passion for the Dharma. That is a very good kind of passion to have.

The passion about which the Buddha spoke is passion for sense desire and becoming: "becoming" both in the sense of self-identification as well as continued existence. Dispassion is akin to "losing interest." As you see the problems in sense desire, and as you become more proficient in the superior pleasure of jhāna, they lose their appeal. You become bored with them. Likewise, as you see the risks and dangers in rebirth, you lose interest in becoming.

In the following very rich passage, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu defines the entire path as a process of developing dispassion:

> *Our experience of the present moment is composed of*

the results of past actions, or potentials coming in from our past actions, our present intentions, and the result of our present intentions. And we cling to all three things. We cling to the potentials coming in, we cling to the action whereby we are actualizing them, and we also cling to the results that we anticipate. We do this because we anticipate a great product from this.

The things we actually cling to are actions. The mind doesn't have a hand that can hold onto things, but it has certain ways of acting and thinking about things. And it will cling to a particular way of thinking, cling to a particular way of engaging with the world. And the aggregates it's clinging to, these are actions as well. The Buddha defines feeling as the "act of feeling," the "act of perceiving," the "act of fabricating." Even "form," there is a lot of action in keeping this form going.

So the calculation is because these are actions, we have to put effort into them, are they worth the effort? And the Buddha's saying that in a lot of cases they're not, particularly when you look at the aggregates and sense media.

We feed these things, and then we feed off of them. We create these things because we are basically creating food for ourselves.

The analogy is that you've got chickens. And you feed the chickens because you want the eggs. And as long as the eggs are better than the chicken feed, it's worth it. So you keep it going. But it turns out with the aggregates, 1) they give good and bad eggs, and 2) if you are not really discerning, you are going to take everything that the

chicken produces. We tend not to be very discerning. We don't see the connection between our actions, our cravings and clingings, and the suffering that comes from that. We put the food in, and we take whatever comes out.

The problem is that we are often poor judges of whether it's worth it or not, because we don't notice the fact that, as the Buddha says, we don't really feed off of the aggregates, but the aggregates chew us up. To continue with the chickens, not only do we feed the chickens, but the chickens come peck at us at nighttime. They are the chickens from hell.

So the nature of the discernment that cures this problem itself is a fabrication and an action. We use fabrication to get to the unfabricated. It's also a value judgment. When is it worth it to feed the chickens and when is it not?

We are using the aggregates to create a state of concentration. In a case like that, it's worth feeding them. But if we are using the aggregates for other purposes, then maybe we are not getting the eggs out of the chicken. We are eating the chicken shit. So be careful.

And in the meantime, as we are doing this process of gaining discernment, we also have to provide alternative food for the mind. That's what the concentration is for, and learning how to take joy in generosity, joy in virtue, and the visceral sense of well-being that comes from the concentration, this is what feed you so you can look at your old ways of feeding and see that they are really not worth it. These chickens are giving bad eggs, so you can stop feeding those chickens.

The Buddha compares these things to a beverage in a bronze cup:

> *“Suppose, bhikkhus, there was a bronze cup of a beverage having a fine color, aroma, and taste, but it was mixed with poison. Then a man would come along, oppressed and afflicted by the heat, tired, parched, and thirsty. They would tell him: ‘Good man, this beverage in the bronze cup has a fine color, aroma, and taste, but it is mixed with poison. Drink it if you wish. If you drink it, it will gratify you with its color, aroma, and taste, but by drinking it you will meet death or deadly suffering.’ Suddenly, without reflecting, he would drink the beverage — he would not reject it — and thereby he would meet death or deadly suffering.”* - [SN II.12.66]

It’s a value judgment, and it’s a judgment of what’s worth feeding on and what’s not worth feeding on. That’s how discernment works; that’s how insight works. You’re passing judgment on things, on activities, to see if the effort that goes into maintaining this, creating this, feeding this, is actually worth the nourishment, or is it not worth the nourishment.

And the Buddha suggests that at that final point of practice you let go of everything. Up to that point you let go of things that are unskillful, things that are getting in the way of the path.

The first three truths have to do with dispassion. The third truth is dispassion, and the duties having to do with the second and first truths have to do with gaining dispassion for those truths. But for the path, you have to

have passion for it. You have to be devoted to meditating, you have to be devoted to the practice of virtue and generosity, up to the point where you've fulfilled the path, then you develop dispassion for it as well.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, March 2017 Retreat at BCBS on Awakening]

Again, this is something that will evolve in your practice. You will be sitting - perhaps in jhāna - and a thought about sense desire will arise. That will be followed by the thought, "Why would I want that?" There may be an aversion to it. The aversion may be quite strong. The Buddha sometimes used the word "revulsion." The Pāli word is "nibbiddā." It is also rendered as "disenchantment" (as in the above quote) or "disgust." "Revulsion" may sound too strong. However, when you experience it in your meditation, it may feel just like that.

Many of the practices that are uncomfortable, like the contemplation of the body parts and the corpse contemplations, are aiming the mind at developing dispassion. You do this because of the dangers in sense pleasures. They contain all sorts of traps. Even if those traps are benign, they all involve at least a subtle sense of addiction, of attachment, and they all consume - feed on - something. On the other side of that lies first, the non-dangerous practice of jhāna. That at least gets you to a higher pleasure, one that does not consume, and one that does not contain the dangers of sense pleasures. Then we use that calm mind to delve into increasingly subtle movements of the mind.

11. The Still Mind

Two monks were watching a flag flapping in the wind. One said to the other, "The flag is moving."

The other replied, "The wind is moving."

[Huineng] overheard this. He said, "Not the flag, not the wind; mind is moving.

- [Paul Reps, Nyogen Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-zen Writings*]

Be still!

- [My mother]

Now we can discuss the meditative approach to awakening, or realization.

As we have seen, the crucial step is to see into the transient nature of phenomena, just as Kondañña and so many others did. In order to do this the mind must be still. The movement in the mind that you must see is extremely subtle. If the mind is not still, as the common analogy goes, it is like trying to discern a landscape from a moving train. You must stop the train first. Otherwise you are not sure what movement is in the landscape and what movement is from the train.

In fact, one way to look at the entire practice is from the standpoint of cultivating stillness. Even our practice of virtue is a way of stilling our actions, of making them quieter, and doing them with greater awareness.

When we first sit, the mind is very wild. We try to get the mind to settle

down and we can't. This is the function of discernment. It is our first insight. The Tibetans call this "attaining the cascading mind." We see the wild mind. This is how we begin the path, by using discernment to see our wild mind, and to develop concentration. Attaining the cascading mind may not seem like much of an accomplishment, but when you see how wild the mind is you are seeing something that only a small fraction of the people on the planet have. Almost all of the important decisions in the world, the ones that are made by powerful people, politicians, corporate leaders and so forth, are made be people who have no idea how out of control their minds are.

As the mind settles, it gets quieter. As the mind gets quieter, we see more of what is happening in the mind. This is how concentration develops discernment. This is why these two qualities are linked together and develop together, supporting each other.

> *"The deepest silence in the mind comes not from concentration – as important as that is as a help – it comes from understanding. When the mind begins to understand itself, it's that understanding that brings a different kind of stillness altogether. It doesn't bring stillness; the stillness is already there. It lets you let go of that which should not be attached to if you want real peace. And when you do that, the stillness is just waiting."*
>
> - [Larry Rosenberg, "The Power of Silence, Talk #1"]

And finally we have a moment of real stillness. It is such a relief! Even just a brief moment of stillness shows us the state our poor mind is in. Usually our mind is running and running and running, but then for the briefest moment it is still. It is like a suddenly arising cool breeze on a hot summer day. Ah!

> *"It's not easy to come by, stillness – deep stillness -*

because it's very shy. And if you have any desire for stillness, want to use anything in order to get it, or want to get it, it will slip away, crawl under a rock, run off into the woods, but avoid you. Really, the only time stillness comes out, is when we stop trying to make it come out, when we have patience and love, particularly love of stillness."

- [Larry Rosenberg, "The Power of Silence, Talk #1"]

The first time that we experience deep stillness, the mind will pull back. One part of our mind wants the stillness, but another one - the more powerful, habitual one - doesn't want to go there. There is fear, because our habitual mind can't go there. It's not allowed in. It is being threatened.

So you approach the stillness gently. Give the mind an opportunity to see the calm and the peace and the comfort of the stillness. Settle into it. After a while you will find that you can simply go there. You catch the mind prattling on, and simply drop the noisy mind and go straight to the stillness. You will like it, and then you will love it.

One thing that helps in this process is cultivating the "inner observer." There are activities in the mind like the stream of thought that we are trying to settle down. But there is also the ability to watch the mind. This is "mind watching mind." The mind can be thinking, but that same mind can also watch the mind that is thinking.

The Buddha says this about observing the mind while in the fourth jhāna:

"Again, a bhikkhu has grasped well the object of reviewing [observing], attended to it well, sustained it well, and penetrated it well with wisdom. Just as one person might look upon another — as one standing might look upon one sitting down, or one sitting down might

> *look upon one lying down — so too, a bhikkhu has grasped well the object of reviewing [observing], attended to it well, sustained it well, and penetrated it well with wisdom."* - [AN 5.28]

Here the Buddha described the experience of observation like an out-of-body experience.

In order to invoke the inner observer, three things will inter-play. One is the focal point of the breath. If, for example, you are following the breath at the nostrils, you keep doing this. The breath will be like the base drum in a band. It keeps the rhythm going.

Then you find a place in the mind that allows you to watch the activities of the mind. There are the two parts of the mind both working. You may have to feather your attention in order to do this. You are attending both to the focal point of the breath and the part of the mind that is watching the mind. You may need to calibrate this, giving at times more attention to the breath and at other times more attention to the watching part of the mind.

When you can settle into this state, where the breath and the watching mind are locked in, this is called "resting in awareness."

One thing that can happen is that the watching part of the mind gets too wrapped up in the thinking part of the mind, and it begins to feed the thinking. This is a case where you need to give the breath a little more attention, and then give the watching part of the mind more weight, little by little.

This process of mind watching mind can in some cases cause the thinking to stop, even if it is just for a moment or two. This can be quite restful, especially compared to the kind of energy drain that the thinking mind is. Discursive thinking sucks up a lot of energy. This is why when people develop the ability to quiet the mind, they often need less sleep.

The inner observer is not something that you should leave on the cushion. The cushion gives you a laboratory to see and develop it. But the inner observer has all kinds of value off of the cushion. It can keep you from wrong speech. It can keep you from breaking the precepts. It is a monitor. And your stress levels will be significantly lower.

As the mind becomes quieter and more still, you see increasingly subtle movements in the mind. At first you will see a thought. Then you will see the process of stirring, arising, falling, and ending in the thought. As the mind gets quieter still, the thought never forms. You see just a slight movement - a slight motion, a stirring - in the mind, but the thought never manifests.

So our concentration makes the mind more still, while our discernment watches what is going on. This requires moving the attention in and out like a zoom lens. The concentration improves and the mind is very still. Now make the slightest change in your attention so that you are watching the mind in concentration. Look for any stress, no matter how miniscule. Look for any movement in the mind.

You go back and forth between being in concentration, and watching the mind in concentration. The concentration lets the mind become both still and bright, and sharp like a good knife. Pulling back to watch the mind in concentration lets you see where there is still stress, where there is still some kind of disturbance. Even when the mind seems to be completely quiet, there is still activity there:

> *""...as the mind gets really, really still, nothing seems to be going on in the mind. But there is still a kind of commentary. Just the commentary that says, 'space, space,' or 'knowing, knowing' or 'nothing, nothing.' That's a movement of the mind. And you've got to turn around and look at that and say, 'Oh. There's this movement here. Everything else seemed to be still. I thought everything was nice and still, but there is still this*

happening.' It is seeing both sides, Seeing whatever movements of thought or feeling or perception are going on, and also the part of the mind that seems to be humming along with it, or following along with it, commenting on it."

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Need for Stillness"]

Cultivating the still mind is very important. And once you can do it on the cushion, take it with you all the time. See how much of the time you can keep the mind still throughout the day. Let go of your involvement with thoughts, and the movements of the mind. Make a choice not to get involved with them.

The still mind is not the end of the path, but we are getting closer:

"Now there are people who will get the mind very still and just curl up in that stillness and not use it to any purpose. But that is not what the Buddha taught. You get the mind still and you want to be aware all around. This is why Ajahn Lee, when he defines 'alertness,' talks about us going back and forth. You look at, say, your breath, and then you turn around and look at the mind. You are alert to both. You see how they are connected. And to be aware of any movement where the mind pulls away. It's that all around kind of awareness that you want."

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Need for Stillness"]

This "all around kind of awareness" is the quality of "knowing." Normally when we are aware of something, there is verbal fabrication associated with it. We perceive, and we turn that into a sentence, even if it is just internal.

Knowing is without verbal fabrication. There is no language associated

with it. People who have Near Death Experiences report this type of consciousness. They are aware of what is going on, but it is not tied to language.

This is something you train yourself to do. As the mind gets quiet, look for this quality, and learn how to settle into it.

Stillness is not just a quality to be developed on the cushion. As with so many of these practices, they are not of much value if you do not bring them into everyday life.

This can be a real problem in Buddhist practice. I knew a woman who had practiced quite diligently for 10 years. She was a Zen practitioner and had done many sesshins, which is an intensive Zen retreat. Zen is particularly strict when it comes to practice, and it requires a great deal of discipline.

Nonetheless I could never see an indication that her practice had any benefit in her daily life. She was wildly emotional, and caused herself a great deal of hardship and suffering. She invented all sorts of problems in her mind.

Apropos of this phenomenon I ran into this review of a book on Zen on the Amazon web site:

> *My experience at traditional Zen Centers is that they are beautiful and that meditation practice there has a sense of perceptible strength - it seems quite grounded. The trouble comes when people are off the cushions. I can't say that I see a great deal of impact of practice on peoples' lives. There is still plenty of confusion and reactivity. There is still an attachment to personal drama. I had teachers tell me that the first step is for people to break through and see who they really were; later they would integrate. I am not sure that step two generally occurs.*

- [“Mike in the Middle”, Amazon.com]

This is not to pick on Zen. It happens everywhere. And one reason this happens a lot in the West is that we do not do the everyday things that happen in Asian Buddhist countries like giving alms and going to a temple on Uposatha days. We emphasize meditation. This is very unusual in Asian Buddhist countries. In Asia the majority of Buddhists do not practice meditation, but it is a part of their daily lives.

Figure: Giving alms to monks in Myanmar

We have to be constantly aware of ways in which we can bring the practice into our daily lives. Walking meditation can be very helpful in training the mind to be “still in motion”:

> *But that’s not the only purpose for the walking. In the Canon, when the Buddha talks about the benefits of walking meditation, some of them are health benefits, but in terms of the mind, he says that the concentration developed while walking is not easily destroyed. This is an important point to ponder. When we sit quietly, we’re trying to get the mind still, and we try to keep the body still as a way of helping the mind along. But you also want to be able to keep the mind still in the midst of movement, in the midst of activity. That’s where walking*

meditation comes in.

When you get up from your sitting meditation to walk, try to maintain the same center you had while sitting. You might think of it as a bowl full of oil that you're carrying with you as you get up from the seat and walk over to the path and continue walking. You don't want to spill a drop. That requires a readjustment in where you keep your focus. Normally, when you open your eyes, the first tendency is for your awareness to go flowing out the eyes, out into the world of your visual sphere. You lose some of your sense of being inside the body.

So remind yourself not to lose that sense. Maintain it even as you open your eyes. You may find that this can knock you off balance the first time you try it, for it means finding a different kind of balance from what you're used to. But it's important that you develop this new sense of balance, this sense of being fully inside your body, fully in the breath, even while walking, even while moving, even while negotiating with the surroundings in which you walk, because eventually you want to get to the point where you can maintain that same sense of center in the midst of all your activities—talking, working, eating, whatever— wherever you are. And this is a good first step in that direction. Walking meditation is a means of connecting your sitting meditation with mindfulness throughout daily life.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Walking Meditation: Stillness in Motion", July 20, 2006]

Stillness and the inner observer will not be of much value if you leave them on the cushion. Take the stillness that you cultivate on the cushion

with you throughout the day. Inhabit your body with grace and dignity.

The birds have vanished down the sky.
Now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,
Until only the mountain remains.
- [Li Bai, “Zazen on Ching-t’ing Mountain”]

12. Fabrication, Intention and Cessation

The Death of Me

> *“Here, friend Visākha, a well-taught noble disciple, who has regard for noble ones and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, who has regard for true men and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, does not regard material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form. He does not regard feeling as self, or self as possessed of feeling, or feeling as in self, or self as in feeling. He does not regard perception as self, or self as possessed of perception, or perception as in self, or self as in perception. He does not regard formations as self, or self as possessed of formations, or formations as in self, or self as in formations. He does not regard consciousness as self, or self as possessed of consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That is how identity view does not come to be.”* - [MN 44.8]

We have been inching our way toward awakening. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu compares it to walking out along the continental shelf. (Bring scuba gear.) The ocean bottom slopes away from the land gradually. But then there is a place where there is suddenly a dramatic drop-off. That is the moment of awakening:

> *The path to this awakening is necessarily gradual, both because the sensitivity it requires takes time to develop,*

and because it involves developing skills that you abandon only when they've done their job. If you abandoned craving for concentration before developing it, you'd never get the mind into a position where it could genuinely and fully let go of the subtlest forms of doing.

But as your skills converge, the awakening they foster is sudden. The Buddha's image is of the continental shelf off the coast of India: a gradual slope, followed by a sudden drop-off. After the drop-off, no trace of mental stress remains. That's when you know you've mastered your skills. And that's when you really know the four noble truths.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Ignorance"]

As we have seen from the stories at the time of the Buddha the normal formula is to see into the process of cause and effect, dependent co-arising. When that comes into focus there is a fundamental shift in the mind. We start with a gross insight into the process of cause and effect. We see how a thought arises and passes away. This is the most common experience of seeing dependent co-arising for the first time.

But the Buddha also showed us a very fine, detailed and subtle process whereby this aggregate we call "me" perpetuates itself. And as our practice deepens, we see how we create a persona from this transient process. This is "becoming." We see craving and clinging. A thought arises in the mind, or perhaps it starts with a sound or some other sense input. Then the mind runs away with that simple feeling. It creates a whole story, a fantasy. Then we hold onto it. That is the clinging.

We even cling to unwholesome thoughts. You have a bad experience, and the mind holds onto it. It keeps coming up and coming up. The mind won't let go. In these cases it is very useful to ask yourself, "What is the mind is getting out of that?" Why is it clinging to a painful memory? It

certainly is not a way to be happy.

These are all the ways in which we create our own neurosis. Seeing them will not necessarily get rid of them, but it loosens the attachment. As your practice grows it even begins to look a little crazy. Why do we do this? Even that will not make it go away, but it moves us in the right direction. We at least have the right trajectory.

The problem is often one of the most fundamental types of clinging and that is clinging to self-view, to *me*. Painful, recurring memories have one powerful purpose, and that is to feed the notion that *I am*. *I am* a victim. *I* exist. *I* am the center of the universe. *I* am important, even if that "I" suffers a lot. And when you ask yourself the question, "Why do I keep thinking this? What am I getting out of it?" the answer is quite often that it feeds the sense of self-identity. Even if *I* feel crappy, I know that *I exist*.

One strategy is to see the self-identification. This is discernment, insight, and wisdom. When the mind gets still, maybe even very still, you can use the inner observer to see that sense of self. You can see that even the still mind has the notion that it is my mind that is still. This still mind is *me*. *I* am making the mind still. Then you can let go of that, and just let the still mind be the still mind without the encumbrance of a fabricated self. You will feel a slight loss of stress and a greater sense of freedom and liberation.

The Buddha told us that stream-entry comes when we abandon three fetters: attachment to rites and rituals, doubt, and self-view. I think for most people it is the self-view that is the biggest problem. In order to attain stream-entry, it will be helpful to train yourself to see it. This can happen anywhere at any time. It does not have to be on the cushion. Someone cuts you off driving and anger arises. Why? All you have to do is slow down. But the anger arises because *that driver* did something to *me*.

A very common issue on the path to awakening is fear of the death of the self. Our habits and conditions are strongly ingrained. Anyone who

meditates even a little knows this. And our attachment to and self-identification with those habits is even more deeply ingrained. There is the habit itself. That is simply a habit, a conditioned response. But then there is the attachment to the habit. They are both problems.

It would be unusual for someone who begins to detach from self-identification not to experience fear. This is sometimes called "spiritual death" or "ego [sic] death." In order to pass through the barrier of awakening, this process of self-identification must end, and that will feel very much like death. The mind will rebel. Zen Master Hakuin described the process of awakening like this:

> *"Like a man hanging over a precipice he is completely at a loss what to do next. Except for occasional feelings of uneasiness and despair, it is like death itself. All of a sudden he finds his mind and body wiped out of existence."*
>
> - [William Barret (ed.), *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*]

One way to deal with this fear is to concentrate on its opposite, and that is the feeling of liberation that comes with letting go of the sense of self. It is, after all, the sense of self that is a key fetter. See if you can tap into this feeling of liberation, where the loss of self-identity is like lifting an enormous burden. Whenever you see that sense of selflessness, go to that feeling. And when you see the sense of self-identification, let go of it. This is how gradually you abandon the fetter of self-view.

Ego

It is worth saying something about the use of the word "ego" in Buddhism, because it is used so commonly in certain Western Buddhist circles.

It is unfortunate that the word has come into common use in Western Buddhism. My guess is that when Zen and Tibetan Buddhism came to the West, the Buddhist teachers found something in common with Western psychology. So they adapted the use of the word "ego" as a way of expressing the Buddha's teachings on self and non-self to a Western audience. At the time it probably felt quite skillful. Here was a way in which they could relate the Buddha's teachings to a new culture.

What makes that unfortunate, however, is that an ego, by definition, is a *thing*. If we think in terms of an ego, we turn what the Buddha described as a process - a chain of causes and effects - into an object. We are doing exactly what the Buddha told us not to do, and that is to take that chain of causes and effects and turn it into something substantial, a kind of self.

By objectifying this process, we give it life. And by turning it into the bad guy we set up an adversarial relationship with a concept. The concept of an ego is just that, a concept. And as Ajahn Lee says, concepts are just shadows that cross the mind. They are illusions, and further, they are illusions that we create. We fabricate this notion of an ego, and create yet another way to suffer.

The Buddha clearly stated that there are no things, just processes:

> *"Good, bhikkhus. So you say thus, and I also say thus: 'When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises.'"* - [MN 38.19]

This is the Buddha's simplest expression of dependent co-arising. It applies, in fact, to the whole of existence. Everything that comes to be is the result of causes and conditions. And it is our attachment to the transient processes of body and mind that causes a great deal of suffering. This is the teaching on non-self. And when we relate it to the whole of existence, it is emptiness.

It is actually easier to deal with this attachment if we do not empower it by calling it an "ego." It is simply an impersonal process of causes and

effects. If anger arises and there is a decision to act on it, then the result is likely to be unwholesome. There is no "I" or "me." There is simply this cause and effect. And if the unskillful cause is seen and there is a choice not to react to it, then the result is wholesome. This is how the mind is trained. And there does not have to be shame or guilt or self-loathing because there is no one to feel the shame, guilt, or self-loathing. There is *just this*.

This also brings up the often-asked question, if there is no self than why do we use words like "I" and "me."

I hope that by now you know that the Buddha did not say there is no self. What he said is that our minds create a permanent, substantial self from the processes of body and mind, the five aggregates. But even the aggregates are not the problem. In fact, wise use of the aggregates is part of the solution.

The problem is the attachment. We attach to and self-identify with the transient processes "body" and "mind" as being something substantial and permanent. But just like a weather system, they are ever-changing, and you cannot find a permanent essence. The weather system exists, to be sure, but not in any permanent or substantial way.

However, the weather system does exist. It just exists as an aggregate of causes and effects. So when the Buddha uses the term "I" he is referring to the aggregates. "Aggregates" is a collective noun that refers to the activities of body and mind.

Fabrication

Gradually our insights get more refined. And the more refined our insights get, the deeper into the process of dependent co-arising we see.

One of the things that the Buddha discovered in his awakening is that we fabricate our own experience. In the teaching on dependent co-arising, that fabrication process is conditioned by ignorance, specifically

ignorance of the Four Noble Truths. Until we end this process of fabrication, we will continue to be reborn and we will continue to suffer. The Buddha, after his awakening, famously uttered these words:

Through many births
I have wandered on and on,
Searching for, but never finding,
The builder of [this] house.
To be born again and again is suffering.

House-builder, you are seen.
You will not build a house again.
All the rafters are broken,
The ridgepole destroyed;
The mind, gone to the Unconstructed,
Has reached the end of craving.
- [Dhp, 153,154]

To see the process of fabrication the mind must be quite still. Then you can see how phenomena are fabricated. Thoughts are the easiest phenomena to see. If the mind is still enough you can see perception at work. You can hear a sound and watch the process by which the mind turns that sound into "airplane."

We even fabricate our feelings of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. We are always constructing our experience. Some of that activity comes from past karma, and some of it comes from present karma, i.e., how we choose to meet the present moment. If I am grumpy I will experience it one way, if I am happy and content, I will experience it another way.

That was one of the Buddha's most important insights: that even when you're sitting perfectly still with the intention not to do anything, there's still the intention, and the intention itself is a doing. It's a sankhara, a fabrication. It's what we live with all the time. In fact, all

of our experience is based on fabrication. The fact that you sense your body, feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, consciousness - all of these aggregates: To be able to experience them in the present moment you have to fabricate a potential into an actual aggregate. You fabricate the potential for form into an actual experience of form, the potential for feeling into an actual experience of feeling, and so on. This element of fabrication lies in the background all the time. It's like the background noise of the Big Bang, which hums throughout the whole universe and doesn't go away. The element of fabrication is always there, shaping our experience, and it's so consistently present that we lose sight of it. We don't realize what we're doing.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Watch What You're Doing"]

The Present Moment

"...the bhikkhu who develops mindfulness of death thus: 'May I live just the length of time it takes to chew and swallow a single mouthful of food so that I may attend to the Blessed One's teaching. I could then accomplish much!'; and the one who develops mindfulness of death thus: 'May I live just the length of time it takes to breathe out after breathing in, or to breathe in after breathing out, so that I may attend to the Blessed One's teaching. I could then accomplish much!': these are called bhikkhus who dwell heedfully. They develop mindfulness of death keenly for the destruction of the taints.

"Therefore, bhikkhus, you should train yourselves thus: 'We will dwell heedfully. We will develop mindfulness of

death keenly for the destruction of the taints.' Thus should you train yourselves." - [AN 6.16]

For those of you who have made your way through all of the Little Books, you may be wondering why I have not written about present moment awareness. For many people this seems to be the very essence of the practice.

Note, by the way, that I use the term "present moment awareness," not "being in the present moment." This is a bit technical, but "being" is part of the problem. The term "present moment awareness" is in the letter and the spirit of the Buddha's teachings. It is a conditioned state, part of a causal process. But it does not imply a sense of self-identification. "Present moment awareness" is a mind state without a constructed "me" standing behind it.

One reason that I have not talked about present moment awareness until now is that it is a radical notion. It is not just being attentive to what you are doing now, although there is that aspect to it. You want to treat every moment as if you are doing brain surgery. There is no room for error. You need to pay attention, *appropriate* attention.

Almost everything that we have done so far relates to present moment awareness. We follow the breath. We quiet the mind. We do our practice. This may be the body contemplations. It may be watching feelings they rise and fall. This may be watching the mind, especially thoughts. You have never been given an instruction to fantasize about the future or think about the past.

Sometimes we have to think about the future. If you are planning a trip, you have to make plans. You need to account for the mechanics of life, buying food, getting the car serviced, making a doctor's appointment.

The difference for the advanced meditator is that these are conscious, deliberate activities. Usually our thinking is going on and on like an out-of-control train. The thinking is using us. This uses a lot of energy.

Part of what this training does is takes the thinking that uses us and puts us in charge of the thinking. We use it, when we need to.

You may be surprised to know that the Buddha did not talk a lot about present moment awareness. It is there but you have to look for it:

> *At Sāvatthī. Standing to one side, that devatā recited this verse in the presence of the Blessed One:*
>
> *"Those who dwell deep in the forest,*
> *Peaceful, leading the holy life,*
> *Eating but a single meal a day:*
> *Why is their complexion so serene?"*
>
> *[The Blessed One:]*
>
> *"They do not sorrow over the past,*
> *Nor do they hanker for the future.*
> *They maintain themselves with what is present:*
> *Hence their complexion is so serene.*
> *"Through hankering for the future,*
> *Through sorrowing over the past,*
> *Fools dry up and wither away*
> *Like a green reed cut down."*
> - [SN 1.10]

The present moment is shorthand for everything that we are doing. But present moment awareness is not just a simple activity of attention. It is a radical way to use the mind. When we are really in the present moment, we are not fabricating anything. We are not creating a self. This is the very essence of awakening. Being totally and truly in the present moment ends the process of fabrication.

This is where the language of Zen is very helpful. When you sit, just sit. When you walk, just walk:

[Hyakujo] was once asked, "Do you ever make any effort to get disciplined in the [Dharma]?"

"Yes, I do."

"How do you exercise yourself?"

"When I am hungry I eat; when tired I sleep."

"This is what everybody does; can they be said to be exercising themselves in the same way as you do?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because when they eat they do not eat, but are thinking of various other things, thereby allowing themselves to be disturbed; when they sleep, they do not sleep, but dream of a thousand and one things. This is why they are not like myself."

- [D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*]

The activity is purposeful, but there is nothing added.

My first practice was Zen. But it was not until I put the Zen practice of shikantaza ("just sitting") together with the Buddha's instructions on dependent co-arising that it made any sense to me. To this day I believe that what I was told to do was just sit. Then, as the cartoon says, within 10 years or so a miracle would occur.

But Master Dogen taught the practice of shikantaza, and he was a great Zen Master. He was certainly no fool. He was not telling us to do nothing. He was telling us to do precisely what the Buddha did, and that is to unravel the process of fabrication. Get the mind quiet, see its

activity, get the mind even quieter, see that activity, and keep winding down until the activity ceases:

> *"While you are practicing just sitting, be clear about everything going on in your mind. Whatever you feel, be aware of it, but never abandon the awareness of your whole body sitting there. Shikantaza is not sitting with nothing to do; it is a very demanding practice, requiring diligence as well as alertness. If your practice goes well, you will experience the 'dropping off' of sensations and thoughts. You need to stay with it and begin to take the whole environment as your body. Whatever enters the door of your senses becomes one totality, extending from your body to the whole environment. This is silent illumination."*
>
> - [Master Sheng Yen, *Attaining the Way: A Guide to the Practice of Chan Buddhism*]

However, this is not how I remember being instructed in Zen practice. And if we look at the history of Zen we can see why.

There was a power struggle at the end of Dogen's life. He was sick and dying so he turned his monastery, the legendary Eihei-ji, over to his best student, Koun Ejō, and Koun's responsibilities to his disciples Senne and Gien. However, Koun had competition from students of another teacher, Darumashū. Darumashū's students did not recognize Koun's authority. Darumashū had more or less gotten his Dharma transmission by mail from another teacher, and his Dharma understanding was not very deep.

Koun also had trouble with another of Dogen's students, Tettsū Gikai. Tettsū wanted to reintroduce parts of the practice that Dogen specifically rejected. Further, even Dogen noted Tettsū's lack of compassion for his other students.

So the short version of the story is that Zen from there onward was just not what it had been under Dogen.

But if we rewind to the time of Dogen, his teaching makes a lot of sense. When I started reading his epic work, the *Shobogenzo*, I felt like I was in a class on the Pāli Canon. Dogen was clearly well-versed in the discourses. And when you view Zen from a foundation of the Pāli Canon, it all makes sense. In fact, Zen is a remarkable, uniquely Chinese and Japanese addition to the Buddha's teachings.

And as we move toward awakening, and it gets harder and harder to describe the process, the language of Zen is a beautiful, poetic way to express it:

> *…just before departing to visit other teachers, Dongshan asked Yunyan, "Later on if I am asked to describe your reality [teaching], how should I respond?" After some pause, Yunyan said, "'Just this' is it."*
>
> - [Taigen Dan Leighton, *Just This Is It: Dongshan and the Practice of Suchness*]

Cessation

We are cultivating the skill whereby the mind becomes concentrated, which is jhāna. When we are in jhāna, we also develop the ability to step back and examine that concentrated mind. This is the quality of discernment. We go back and forth between these two subtly different states of mind. The concentrated mind creates serenity and stillness. The discernment helps us to see and understand. Thus the qualities of samādhi and paññā develop "yoked together."

As the mind gets more still, one thing you can discern is the "commentator":

> *Once there was someone from Singapore who wrote a*

letter to Ajahn Fuang describing his practice which was to learn how to see everything in terms of the three characteristics. When he was at work or watching TV he kept noting to himself, "This is impermanent, stressfulness," whatever. Ajahn Fuang's advice to him was, well, turn around and see who is doing the commenting, because he said that the problem lies there. It's not in the inconstancy of TV shows, or the stress of your work, it's the inconstancy of this commenter/commentator. Because once the commentator passes judgment on something, then some intentions arise, and the intentions are what keeps everything going. And until you see that then there is no true letting go. The letting go isn't total, it's only when the letting go is total that you open up to something that has no motions. It's the motions of the mind that keep the whole process going, kind of like a weaver. It keeps weaving your experience of space and time. And it can weave it with craving, and it can weave it with perception, and feelings and all off these other things, but is the element of intention and attention that's what keeps it all going.

And until you can see those things moving, nothing really disbands. Once your stillness is still enough and your awareness is all around enough, to the point where you catch even the slightest movement, anywhere in the mind, that's when things open up.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Need for Stillness"]

Perhaps you can see why the fourth jhāna is such a good tool for awakening. In the fourth jhāna the mind is quite still, equanimous, "purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy,

steady, and attained to imperturbability..." [MN 4.27] The pleasant sensations of the lower jhānas don't distract us, although the Buddha did say that it is possible to attain awakening in any jhāna. It is just that the fourth jhāna is the optimal one.

What we must do is to take that still mind and direct it to the process by which the mind fabricates our experience. This is step two in the process of dependent co-arising: "saṇkhāra," "fabrications," "volitional formations." These are the willful activities of mind that are conditioned by ignorance.

Our discernment begins by looking at grosser forms of saṇkhāra, like thoughts and perceptions. But even when the mind seems quite still, when there does not seem to be anything at all happening, there is still an intention in the mind. This intention is the most subtle form of saṇkhāra. Ultimately, it is this subtle intention to fabricate experience that stands in the way of the greatest happiness, the end to suffering. So you let go of that intention, and open to the deathless.

You cannot force this to happen. You can only put into place the precipitating factors, the "proximal causes." The mind must get there on its own and in its own good time. Most of the descriptions of awakening are descriptive, not proscriptive. You cannot consciously eliminate the fetters, or put out the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. That happens as your concentration, stillness, discernment, and understanding grow, fueled by virtue, appropriate attention, right intention, and patience and persistence:

> *From that point on I kept at it. I kept investigating out in the area of discernment, ranging out widely, then circling back in again. As soon as I would understand, step by step, the mind would let go and circle inward in an ever-narrowing sphere, investigating the khandhas [aggregates] and elements, separating the khandhas and elements.*

This is where it began to be 'samuccheda-pahana' - absolute relinquishment, arising from the investigation in the period that followed. As long as the investigation hadn't been absolute, it would win out for only a period of time, just enough to serve as evidence and proof. It still wasn't absolute relinquishment. But when discernment came to a really clear understanding while investigating, then it pulled out and severed all ties, step by step - severed things so that there were no connections left; severed them step by step, leaving just plain awareness.

The body (rupa) was severed from attachment. Vedana [feelings], saññā [perceptions], sankhara [fabrications], and viññana [consciousness] were severed from attachment. Or you could say that the 'heart' was severed from 'them.' Things kept being severed until only awareness was left - in other words, the mind with unawareness buried inside it. So I probed on in, smashed things to bits, slashed them to smithereens with up-to-the-minute mindfulness and discernment. The mind of unawareness broke apart, and when the mind of unawareness broke apart, that was all!

- [Venerable Acariya Maha Boowa Ñanasampanno, "At the End of One's Rope"]

When you awaken, what is left is the knowing:

When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: 'It is liberated.' He understands: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to

any state of being.' - [MN 51.27]

Just this is it.

Move forward, relentlessly, moment by moment, breath by breath, never forgetting the main prize: freedom, liberation, awakening, and the end to suffering.

13. Postscript

You may be wondering where to go from here.

I cannot completely answer that question for you. Everyone has a different life situation. You have to work within the parameters of what that is.

There is a story from the Zen tradition about a monk named "Isan." Isan was a monk, but his job was as a lowly cook. But Isan used his job as a vehicle for penetrating the Dharma, and Master Hyakujo appointed him to open a new monastery over the heads of all the other senior monks.

Ideally you would find a fantastic teacher and ordain as a monk or nun. That is the way to optimize your practice. However, being a layperson does not necessarily put you at a disadvantage. Monks and nuns spend a lot of time doing things that are not directly related to practice. Being a monk or a nun is a job, and it comes with certain responsibilities.

And being in a monastery is no guarantee that you will be in a good situation to practice. A monastery is full of people, and expecting to find perfect people in a monastery is like going to a hospital and expecting to find healthy people. People in a monastery hope to become perfect, but if they already were they would have no need for a monastery. And if you really need to be dissuaded about the perfect life in a monastery, read the book *Thank You and OK! An American Zen Failure in Japan* by David Chadwick. If you have not gotten anything else from these Little Books, I hope that you have at least gotten the idea that this is real life. Even in the Buddha's own Saṇgha things were far from perfect. I mean, his cousin tried to kill him, more than once. Mercy.

In medieval China it was common for lay Buddhists to live fairly conventional lives. They would take up a trade or be a merchant or something like that, get married, have children and so on. But while they

were doing this they would practice as best they could. They would also live frugally and simply. They would be good people, kind and generous and virtuous. Then when the children were grown the hope was that they had saved enough money to be able to retire and spend the rest of their lives practicing. Many times they did this with their Buddhist friends and contemporaries.

And you can learn a lot living a conventional life. You can learn the discipline of a trade. That discipline relates directly to the discipline of practice. You can learn how to handle human relationships. You can practice right speech. You can practice generosity. You can practice living simply and in harmony with people and the planet.

Whatever your situation in life and whatever your circumstances and your temperament and unique personality and abilities and disabilities, that is your kōan, as the Zen folks would say. This is the riddle of your life, and ultimately you are the only one who can solve it. Other people can help, of course, but ultimately no one will be as motivated to solve your problems of living as you are.

I was at the meeting of a meditation group once that was being led by a Buddhist nun. A man in the group got up and said that when he looked at his life, he realized that 97% of what he did was trivial and unimportant. He was clearly looking to her to provide an answer. She looked at him and replied simply, "I will leave you with that thought."

I would like to suggest some additional resources. As I mentioned earlier, the most important resource is the Pāli Canon. It is the world's richest literature. It is the operating manual for life. Start with the *Majjhima Nikāya*.

There are also three books on meditation that I recommend:

1. *Breath by Breath: The Liberating Practice of Insight Meditation*, by Larry Rosenberg
2. *Keeping the Breath in Mind & Lessons in Samadhi*, by Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo

3. *With Each & Every Breath*, By Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu

The latter two are available for free. The eBook versions are at Dhammatalks.org. If you want a print version you can get one by request from Metta Forest Monastery in Valley Center, California.

If you are interested in the history of Buddhism and the entire landscape of Buddhist practice, I highly recommend *The Foundations of Buddhism* by Rupert Gethin. I love this book so much I wore out my first copy. Whenever I have a question about how this group does this or that group does that or what was happening in the First Millennium in India, etc., etc., etc., this is where I go. It is a fascinating read.

And finally I will recommend a sort of Buddhist guilty read. This book is not about Buddhism. It is about the many remarkable and often heroic people who rediscovered the Buddhist sites and Buddhist history in India. It is called *The Search for the Buddha: The Men Who Discovered India's Lost Religion*. It is by the British writer and historian Charles Allen. The story behind the story is that when Muslim invaders threw the Buddhists out of India, they went to a great deal of trouble to destroy all the great Buddhist universities, temples, libraries, and universities. The Buddhist history of India was largely lost, and even the most famous sites like Bodh Gaya were forgotten. India is not a culture that values history. This may sound strange to a Westerner, but in India they simply have other priorities.

So when Europeans first encountered Buddhism in Asia, it took them quite a while to understand what it was. At first they thought that Buddhism and Hinduism were the same. This is not surprising because in some countries the distinction is pretty blurred. But bit by meticulous bit they pieced together the ancient history of Buddhism. They translated the Pāli Canon, which was an enormous feat on its own. And they rediscovered the most important Buddhist sites like Bodh Gaya, Lambini, Kushinigar (were the Buddha died), and the Deer Park at Sāvatthī, where the Buddha first taught the Four Noble Truths.

Europeans have a pretty bad reputation for their time in Asia, and of course this is largely deserved. But some of those Europeans fell in love with Asian culture, especially Indian culture. And with very few resources they did extremely important work. James Prinsep is one of the great heroes of that effort. He was a hugely compassionate man, an engineer who raised money for civic projects in India. He also deciphered the writing on the famous "Asokan Pillars" of India in work that was both tireless and brilliant. He died at the age of 42 from exhaustion and overwork.

We can also never forget the work of the Pāli Text Society (PTS). T.W Rhys Davids and his wife Caroline founded PTS in 1881. At that time almost no one had any interest in supporting the translation of Pāli texts. The Rhys Davids' had to fund their work and find scholars to help do the translations. Nonetheless the Rhys Davids' devoted the rest of their lives to this effort. They created the first Pāli to English dictionary. Then they proceeded to translate or have translated the whole of the Pāli Canon, as well as the commentaries and later literature.

> *By 1922, when T. W. Rhys Davids died, the Pāli Text Society had issued 64 separate texts in 94 volumes exceeding 26,000 pages, as well a range of articles by English and European scholars.*
>
> - [Wikipedia, "Pali Text Society"]

When T.W. died in 1922 Caroline continued heading up the the work of the PTS until she died in 1942.

The fact that we even have such a thing as Buddhism in the West is because of many extraordinary people who found something they may not have at first understood, but they sensed was important. Many of them went off to Asia to see what they could discover. Even when they died it is hard to know what their understanding of the Buddha's teachings was. But our practice would not exist if not for them. This is a cause for great humility and gratitude. We are truly standing on the

shoulders of giants.

If you get the opportunity, please go on pilgrimage to India. If you are drawn to this practice in even the slightest way, then you will be going home. Go to the places where the Buddha lived and taught. Think of what happened there. Think of how blessed we are to be able to visit these places. And of course, use it as an inspiration for your own practice. You are a direct descendant of a great tradition. It is a tradition of peace, compassion, love, kindness, and wisdom. It is a tradition that embodies the greatest good in being human.

Even if you practice alone, you are never alone. The Buddha and the Saṇgha and all those who have gone before are there with you. You sit in a world of transcendent beauty.

And then there is simply this:

> *"Now, bhikkhus, I declare to you: all conditioned things are of a nature to decay — strive on untiringly." These were the Tathāgata's last words.*
> - [DN 16.6.7]

Those who
Fully cultivate the Factors of Awakening,
Give up grasping,
Enjoy non-clinging,
And have destroyed the toxins,
Are luminous,
And completely liberated in this life.
- [Dhp 89]

Appendices

Appendix A - Glossary of Terms

Abhidhamma (Pāli, Sanskrit: Abhidharma)

> The *Abhidhamma* is the third of the "three baskets" in the Pāli Canon, although scholars date it to 100 to 200 years after the time of the Buddha. It has been variously described as philosophy, psychology, and metaphysics. The *Abhidhamma* is highly revered in the Theravada tradition, and highly criticized in the others (!).

Ajahn (also *Ajaan*)

> Thai word meaning "teacher." In Buddhism it is a monk who has at least ten years of seniority.

Aṇguttara Nikāya

> Literally *Increased by One Collection*, but usually translated as *Numerical Discourses*. It is the second of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. The *Aṇguttara Nikāya* is organized in eleven books according to the number of items referenced in them (i.e., the Four Noble Truths is in the Book of Fours).

arahant (Pāli, Sanskrit: arahat)

> Literally "one who is worthy," a perfected person, i.e., one who has attained nirvāṇa.

awakening

Also called “enlightenment.” It is a sudden insight into transcendent, ultimate truth. This is the goal of the Buddha’s system of training. After awakening one is free from un-necessary suffering, and after death is free from all suffering. In Buddhist cosmology a fully awakened person, or “arahant,” is free from the rounds of rebirth.

Bhante (Pāli)

Literally “Venerable Sir.” A senior Buddhist monastic who has been ordained at least ten years. Although it is a masculine term it is gender neutral and is used for both monks and nuns.

bhikkhu (Pāli, Sanskrit: bhikṣu)

Literally “beggar.” An ordained Buddhist monk. However the term can also refer to anyone following the Buddhist path. When the Buddha gave a talk he would address it to the highest ranking persons there. The rank order was 1) monks, 2) nuns, 3) lay men, and 4) lay women. Thus if even one monk were present, he would address the talk to “bhikkhus.”

Bodhisatta (Pāli, Sanskrit: Bodhisattva)

The term used by the Buddha to refer to himself both in his previous lives and as a young man in his current life, prior to his awakening, in the period during which he was working towards his own liberation.

deva

In the Buddhist cosmology devas are gods or heavenly beings that live in the realm just above humans.

Dharma (Sanskrit, Pāli: dhamma)

In Buddhism, the word “dharma” can have three different

meanings. The first meaning is the *universal nature of how things are*. At the time of the Buddha, each religious school had its own Dharma, or understanding of how things are. The second meaning of Dharma is the *teachings of the Buddha*. The third meaning is *phenomena*. Buddhism sees everything in terms of causes and affects. Mental activities, for example, are *dharmas*. When referring to the teachings of the Buddha, the word *Dharma* is capitalized. When referring to phenomena, it is not capitalized.

Dhammapada-aṭṭhakatha ("aṭṭhakathā" is Pāli for explanation, commentary)

Commentary to the Dhammapada.

Digha Nikāya

The "Long Discourses" (Pāli digha = "long"). It is the first of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. Pāli scholar Joy Manné makes the argument that the *Digha Nikāya* was particularly intended to make converts (Bhikkhu Bodhi pointedly refers to this as "for the purpose of propaganda"!), with its high proportion of debates and devotional material.

Eight Precepts

These are lay precepts for people who want to practice more intensively. They are often observed on Uposatha Days. The additional precepts (to the Five Precepts) are: 1) refrain from eating after noon, 2) refraining from entertainment, wearing jewelry or using perfumes, and 3) sleeping on luxurious beds or over-sleeping.

fetters

Literally a "chain" that shackles one to the rounds of rebirth. The fetters are 1) self-identity view, 2) attachment to rites and rituals, 3) doubt, 4) sense desire, 5) ill will 6) desire for material existence, 7) desire for immaterial existence, 8) conceit, 9) restlessness, and 10)

ignorance.

Five Faculties

Also called the "Five Strengths" or the "Five Spiritual Faculties." They are 1) faith, 2) energy (vigor/diligence), 3) mindfulness, 4) concentration, and 5) wisdom.

Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Also called the Four Establishings of Mindfulness, and the Four Frames of Reference. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness are 1) the body, 2) feelings, or "feeling tones," 3) mental formations, and 4) mental phenomena.

jhāna (Pāli, Sanskrit: dhyāna)

"meditative absorption." The jhānas are states of high concentration. In the final formulation there are four "material" jhānas and four "immaterial" jhānas.

kōan (Japanese, also kung-an)

A kōan is a riddle or puzzle that Zen Buddhists use during meditation to overcome conceptual thinking in order to unravel a greater truth.

Majjhima Nikāya

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha. It is the second of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. It is generally believed to be the most important collection of discourses in the Canon. The *Majjhima Nikāya* corresponds to the *Madhyama Āgama* which survives in two Chinese translations. Fragments also exist in Sanskrit and Tibetan.

Māra (Pāli, Sanskrit)

Literally "bringer of death." Māra is a deity who embodies the ability of experience, especially sensory experience, to seduce and trap the mind, particularly to prevent the cessation of suffering.

nibbāna (Pāli, Sanskrit: nirvāṇa)

Nibbāna is one of the terms that is used to define the goal of the Buddhist path. It literally means "to extinguish," and means to extinguish the three flames of greed, hatred, and delusion.

non-returner (Pāli, Sanskrit: anāgāmi)

The third of four stages of awakening. A non-returner eliminates the fourth and fifth "fetters" – sense craving and ill-will – and will become an arahant with no more rebirths in the material realm.

once-returner (Pāli: sakadāgāmin, Sanskrit: sakṛdāmin)

The second of four stages of awakening. A once-returner has weakened the fourth and fifth "fetters" – sense craving and ill-will – and will become an arahant with no more than one more rebirth in the material realm.

Pāli Canon

The Pāli Canon is the collection of Buddhist texts preserved in the Pāli language. It consists of three *Pitakas*, or "baskets." These are the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the monastic code), the *Sutta Pitaka* (the discourses of the Buddha and his senior disciples), and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, a later work that is variously described as Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and metaphysics. The Abhidhamma Pitaka is unique to Theravada, or southern, Buddhism; the other collections have versions in the Chinese and Tibetan Canons.

parinibbāna (Pāli, Sanskrit: parinirvāṇa)

Literally "nibbāna after death." When the body of an arahant dies,

this frees the being from saṃsara, the rounds of rebirth.

Pātimokkha (Pāli, Sanskrit: Prātimokṣa)

Literally "towards liberation." It is the list of monastic rules in the Vinaya.

Saṇgha (Pāli, Sanskrit: saṃgha)

Literally "community." At the time of the Buddha the term Saṇgha referred either to the community of monastics (monks and nuns) or the noble Saṇgha, which is the community of people who are stream-enterers, once-returners, non-returners, and arahants.

Satipaṭṭhāna (Pāli)

The "Four Foundations of Mindfulness": (1) the body, (2), feelings/sensations, (3) mental formations (thoughts and emotions), and (4) *dharmas*, or phenomena.

Samaṇa (Pāli, Sanskrit: Śramaṇa)

A wandering ascetic.

Saṃyutta Nikāya

The Connected Discourses. It is the third of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. *The Saṃyutta Nikāya* consists of fifty-six chapters, each governed by a unifying theme that binds together the Buddha's suttas or discourses.

Seven Factors of Awakening (enlightenment)

(1) Mindfulness, (2) investigation, (3) energy, (4) joy/rapture, (5) tranquility, (6) concentration, and (7) equanimity.

stream-entry (Pāli: sotāpanna, Sanskrit: srotāpanna)

The first of four stages of awakening. A stream-enterer overcomes the first three "fetters" – self view, attachment to rites and rituals and skeptical doubt – and will become an arahant in no more than seven lifetimes with no rebirths in the lower realms.

sutta (Pāli, Sanskrit: sutra)

A discourse of the Buddha or one of his disciples. The Pāli word "sutta" refers specifically to the Pāli Canon. The words "sutta" and the Sanskrit form "sutra" literally mean "thread," and are related to the English word "suture."

Tathāgata (Pāli, Sanskrit)

A word the Buddha used when referring to himself. It's literal meaning is ambiguous. It can mean either "thus gone" (tathā-gata) or "thus come" (tathā-āgata). It is probably intentionally ambiguous, meaning that the Buddha, having attained a final awakening, was beyond all comings and goings.

Upāsaka (masculine), **Upāsikā** (feminine) (Pāli, Sanskrit)

Literally "attendant." A lay follower of the Buddha, one who has taken and keeps the Five Precepts.

Uposatha (Pāli, Sanskrit: Upavasatha)

Traditionally held on the new moon and full moon days of the lunar month. This is the day when monastics gather to recite the Pātimokkha (monastic rules) and confess any transgressions. Lay people observe either the Five Precepts or, if they spend the day at a temple or monastery, the Eight Precepts.

Visuddhimagga (Pāli)

Literally, *The Path of Purification*. *The Visuddhimagga* is a Theravada commentarial work attributed to the monk Buddhaghosa, who

formulated it in Sri Lanka in the fifth century CE.

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